

# All About Electability: Women, Power, and the Presidential Elections

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In this essay, I ask the perhaps oldest question regarding diversity and the U.S. American Presidency: Why has the United States not managed to elect a woman President? What are the barriers that have kept and still keep women out of the White House? It is the oldest question because the first candidate who ran for the Presidency and who was not a white male-identified person was Victoria Woodhull in 1872.<sup>1</sup> Since then, women have tirelessly challenged the Presidency as a male institution, but none has succeeded in winning the highest office.<sup>2</sup> The persistence of the U.S. Presidency as an exclusive “boy’s club” is particularly striking, because, from its very inception, the U.S. has been a nation in which women have fought actively for political equality on every level. Further, much of the activism and thought of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 70s emerged in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> Most other Western Democratic nations and over a third of nations world-wide have had or have female heads

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- 1 For an account of Woodhull’s life and achievements, see Antje Schrupp, *Vote for Victoria* (Sulzbach: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 2016). It should be noted that women’s attempts to run for the Presidency and the barriers they faced has become a vast field of research, which I can only partly do justice to here.
  - 2 For accounts of women’s candidacies, see, for instance, Theodore F. Sheckels et al. *Gender and the American Presidency: Nine Presidential Women and the Barriers They Faced* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2012); Ellen Fitzpatrick, *The Highest Glass Ceiling: Women’s Quest for the American Presidency* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2016); Nichola D. Gutgold, *Still Paving the Way for Madam President* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2022).
  - 3 For a similar account, see Sabine Sielke, “‘Stronger Together?’ The Seriality of Feminism, the Gender of Misogyny, and the Case of Hillary Clinton,” in *Women and US Politics: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Julia Nitz and Axel R. Schäfer (Heidelberg: Winter, 2020), 47–68, 47.

of state,<sup>4</sup> and the U.S.'s neighbor, Mexico, has just elected Claudia Sheinbaum as its first female President. Women in so many other countries have shattered what Hillary Clinton called “the highest and hardest glass ceiling.”<sup>5</sup> They have settled the question, once and for all, of whether women are fit for the highest political office. Why not in the United States?

Historically, there are manifold, complex, and interrelated factors that explain women's lack of access to political power. And many of these factors still prevent women from being elected to political office in equal numbers to men at both the state and federal levels. At the time of this writing, only twenty-five of the one hundred seats of the U.S. Senate, for instance, are held by women, and only twenty-nine percent of the seats in the House.<sup>6</sup> Barriers for women to enter politics persist. Yet I argue that since Hillary Clinton's historical candidacy in 2016, all barriers for a woman to be elected President of the United States have fallen – except one: electability bias.

Electability bias, also called pragmatic bias, refers to a particular voting behavior that has been shown to impede women candidates. It refers to voters who would cast their votes in favor of a woman President, and would often prefer women candidates, but do not vote for her in primaries or general elections because they believe other voters do not have confidence in female candidates and will not vote for them. Electability biased or pragmatic voters hence support male candidates instead, because they do not want their vote to be lost on a female candidate who they believe has no chance of winning. This perception of women's candidacies has been central to the primary elections in 2020 and is central to this year's election. In other words, electability bias has in 2020 prevented, and in 2024 most likely will prevent, a woman President.

By why is the electability bias against women so strong? Why has it become the major factor that has prevented women from even being able to run for President in both the 2020 and 2024 elections? I connect the argument about electability bias with an argument that has been made about Trump's gender politics more widely. I suggest that Trump's biggest triumph and damage to

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4 Bastian Herre, “Women have made major advances in politics — but the world is still far from equal,” *Our World in Data*, March 8, 2024, <https://ourworldindata.org/women-political-advances>.

5 CNN Politics, “Hillary Clinton Concession Speech,” CNN, November 9, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/09/politics/hillary-clinton-concession-speech/index.html>.

6 Center for American Women and Politics, “Women in the U.S. Congress 2024,” n.d., <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/levels-office/congress/women-us-congress-2024>.

democracy may be that he has succeeded in re-masculinizing the political field to the point where voters view it as a fight among men and that a woman cannot beat him. At the very moment that women were poised for success – specifically in the 2020 elections – the political field was reconfigured in such a way that suddenly, women seemed unelectable. If Trump’s 2016 win can be seen as a backlash against the election of a “post-racial” President of color, it should equally be seen as a backlash against the possibility of a “post-sexist” woman President. And it is not only Republicans who must be faulted for this backlash. Biden’s candidacy must be seen in exactly this light. The retake of the Biden-Trump race this year attests to the fact that the Democrats have fully bought into the re-masculinization of the political landscape as reconfigured by Trump.

One may question whether it is really that essential that a woman be elected U.S. President, especially at a moment in U.S. politics when democratic foundations as such are at stake. However, one may argue that it is precisely at these moments that we need to focus on exclusions that political systems create and how they contribute to democracy becoming more exclusive, if not dismantled entirely. Democracy is only legitimate, I would suggest with Sue Thomas, “when all of its citizens are provided with equal opportunities for full participation.”<sup>7</sup> Underneath the idea that a democratic politics needs gender diversity lingers the notion of women’s difference and that women would do politics differently. As Sabine Sielke has noted, “the assumption that female leaders lead differently cuts two ways: While underscoring the significance of women’s political participation, it keeps othering women and reinforces gender stereotypes.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, electing a member of a disadvantaged group into office does not mean that that individual will work towards greater social equality.

Nevertheless, I believe that as long as life in the U.S. – and, truly, anywhere else – is so vastly different for men and women and is structured as such by the political and economic systems, women office holders are more likely to address these differences in rights and advantages. What I also hope to demonstrate is that, since the 1916 elections, gendered performances of candidates have been so closely tied to the politics they stand for that the gendered embodiment of the candidate is relevant, on many levels, to the concrete politics

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7 Sue Thomas, “Introduction,” in *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6–25, 2; see also Sielke, “Stronger Together,” 55.

8 Sielke, “Stronger Together,” 56.

they can and will enact. In other words, whether a man or a woman heads the country is not just a symbolic matter. If women consistently do not win that office, this can be read as a symptom of a polity in which inequalities in men's and women's real lives become cemented.

In the following, I first discuss the structural barriers that women have faced and continue to face in running for political office in general and for the Presidency in particular. Data and polls show that almost all structural barriers to women being elected President have been removed. Despite these developments, American politics has arrived at the dynamics of the 2020 and 2024 elections, in which two white men competed and again will compete for the Presidency. To understand how we arrived at these moments, I look at two moments in recent history when a woman almost ran, and then indeed did run, for President for the Democratic Party: Hillary Clinton's campaigns in 2008 and 2016. Clinton ultimately overcame all of the obstacles specific to women candidates and proved that the U.S. is able to elect a woman President, even though she did not win enough votes in the Electoral College.

## The Invisible Glass Ceiling and What Is Left of It

The proverbial “glass ceiling” that women run up against is a term that was coined in 1978 by human resources professional Marilyn Rosen during a panel discussion on women's aspirations and their role in big corporations.<sup>9</sup> It is often invoked in the context of women striving for high political office. Hillary Clinton used it in her concession speech in 2016 to describe what her defeat meant for women. In her stump speeches during the 2024 primaries, Nikki Haley claimed that her candidacy was “not about identity politics, I don't believe in that” and that she did not “believe in glass ceilings, either.”<sup>10</sup> The “glass ceiling” stands for barriers to career success that women face the higher they climb the ladder of corporate or political power. These are invisible barriers that are structural, not personal – in other words, barriers that are rooted in and

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9 Marilyn Loden, “100 Women: ‘Why I invented the glass ceiling phrase,’” BBC, December 13, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-42026266>

10 Dylan Wells, “Nikki Haley walks fine line on race, gender in appeal to GOP base,” The Washington Post, March 21, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/2023/03/20/nikki-haley-race-gender-2024-presidential-gop/>.

upheld by sexism. I want to focus here on barriers in four areas, which are of course interrelated.

When Marilyn Rosen spoke about the glass ceiling in 1978, there was reason to speak about women's disadvantages to enter political office in terms of actual competency. Evidence for entry-level competency for political office is often seen in education and respective degrees. While this was a factor during the 1970s, the educational gap between men and women has since closed, with more women than men now getting college degrees, for instance.<sup>11</sup> The key competency one needs to run for President is experience in political office. Political representation in U.S. federal and state parliaments is by no means near to even. As mentioned above, only roughly a quarter of representatives in Congress identify as women. On the other hand, these numbers have never been higher than today, and a record number of women – twelve, or about a quarter of the total – serve as Governors of their states,<sup>12</sup> which is another key position from which to enter the national political arena. Though they are not represented equally, women have never been more competent to govern than now.

This is also reflected in public opinion on women candidates. In fact, if anything, there is evidence for positive stereotyping of women candidates' competencies. As a recent Pew poll shows, more than fifty percent of voters see women as equally qualified in leadership skills as men, and over thirty percent even tend to see women as more qualified.<sup>13</sup> Leadership skills that the poll asked about included working well under stress and working out political compromises. Competency bias, in short, is a thing of the past.<sup>14</sup>

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11 Statista, "Number of bachelor's degrees earned in the United States from 1949/50 to 2031/32, by gender," Statista, n.d., <https://www.statista.com/statistics/185157/number-of-bachelor-degrees-by-gender-since-1950/>.

12 Center for American Women and Politics, "History of Women Governors," n.d., <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/levels-office/statewide-elective-executive/history-women-governors>.

13 Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Isabel Goddard, "Women and Political Leadership Ahead of the 2024 Election," Pew Research Center, September 27, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/09/27/women-and-political-leadership-ahead-of-the-2024-election/>; specifically, the poll "Majorities say a woman President would be no different."

14 Sabine Sielke has argued that since Trump became President, competency has lost its relevance as a precondition for political office and was replaced by celebrity. While I completely agree with that assessment, women candidates may nevertheless face the criticism that they are not competent enough, and for standard political careers,

However, women face a number of material and access disadvantages. First, women candidates have historically been disadvantaged when it comes to fundraising. The ability to fundraise and campaign is quite clearly connected to personal wealth and the connections that come with it. Over half of the 535 members of the sitting Congress in 2018 were millionaires, and members' average net worth was roughly a million.<sup>15</sup> In terms of personal finances, Congress clearly does not represent the American people. More importantly for my argument, there is not only a gender pay gap in the U.S. but also a significant gender wealth gap: women own less and have fewer connections to people who are wealthy and own businesses.<sup>16</sup> Women have also traditionally had a much harder time attracting large individual donors and political action committees (PACs). This, too, has changed: In 2018, women candidates for Congress outraised male candidates for the first time. The fundraising gap, at least at the level of Congress is closing.<sup>17</sup> During the current primary race, Nikki Haley outraised Donald Trump in the early months of 2024 and attracted a larger number of new donors in late 2023.<sup>18</sup>

Another disadvantage that women face within the party structure is that men enjoy more party support. Studies have shown that men are two-thirds more likely to be asked by an elected official or party leader to run and to be then backed by the party; they are forty percent more likely to have been en-

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which do not bypass competency via celebrity, qualifications for office are still important, both for male and female candidates.

- 15 Karl Evers-Hillstrom, "Majority of lawmakers in 116th Congress are millionaires," *Open Secrets*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2020/04/majority-of-law-makers-millionaires/>.
- 16 Ana Hernández Kent, "Gender Wealth Gaps in the U.S. and Benefits of Closing Them," *Open Vault Blog*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/open-vault/2021/september/gender-wealth-gaps-us-benefits-of-closing-them>.
- 17 Sarah Bryner, "Race, Gender, and Money in Politics: Campaign Finance and Federal Candidates in the 2018 Midterms," Peter G. Peterson Foundation, n.d., <https://www.pgpf.org/sites/default/files/US-2050-Race-Gender-and-Money-in-Politics-Campaign-Finance-and-Federal-Candidates-in-the-2018-Midterms.pdf>.
- 18 Rebecca Davis O'Brien and Jonathan Swan, "Haley Super PAC Says It Raised \$50.1 Million, Eclipsing Trump," *The New York Times*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/25/us/politics/haley-fundraising-trump.html>; Jessica Piper, Lisa Kashinsky and Meredith McGraw, "Haley's money surges after debates. Trump's spikes when he's indicted," *Politico*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/02/02/trump-haley-donors-00139243>.

couraged by a spouse, relative, friend, or colleague.<sup>19</sup> The “encouragement gap” between men and women feeds directly into what has been described as the ambition gap. Over the past two decades, women have consistently been sixteen percent less likely to consider running for office, with the numbers for 2021 being even slightly higher.<sup>20</sup> Support for women to run for any office, in other words, has not increased over the past twenty years. Another major issue is incumbency and retention rates in higher office. This mainly concerns women’s access to seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives, as well as to such seats at the state level. Women have a much harder time winning such seats and hence occupying positions that are prerequisite offices to campaign for the Presidency.<sup>21</sup>

More fundamentally, the question of why fewer women than men hold political office is not only about who has the money, party, or familial support, but also about who has the time to enter politics in the first place. This aspect is understudied in research on women and political office, but I want to stress it here because it is so fundamental. As of 2020, women in the U.S. spend thirty-seven percent more time on care work than men.<sup>22</sup> In practical terms, this means that most women who are mothers and who are professionally qualified to run for office statistically work two jobs at the same time, care work and paid work, while, on average, men who are fathers do not invest as much time in care work. This imbalance puts women at a disadvantage in terms of their resources for public service, especially during a period in their lives – their twenties to forties – when they would need to invest the most time in politics if they wish to build a career.

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19 Carah Ong Whaley and Kylie Holzman, “Why Haven’t We Had a Woman President,” The Center for Politics, September 27, 2023, <https://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/why-havent-we-had-a-woman-president/>; Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, “Running for office is still for men—some data on the ‘Ambition Gap,’” Brookings, February 8, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/running-for-office-is-still-for-men-some-data-on-the-ambition-gap/>.

20 Ibid.

21 Whaley and Holzman, “Why Haven’t We Had a Woman President.”

22 Cynthia Hess, Tanima Ahmed, and Jeff Hayes, “Providing Unpaid Household and Care Work in the United States: Uncovering Inequality,” Institute for Women’s Policy Research, January 2020, <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/IWPR-Providing-Unpaid-Household-and-Care-Work-in-the-United-States-Uncovering-Inequality.pdf>.

There is also a point to be made that the idea of who can best represent the nation to make it to the White House hinges on the heteronormative family. Every President of the twentieth century has fathered one or more children. Throughout the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century, James Polk remains the only President who did not father, adopt, or assume guardianship over children.<sup>23</sup> A single man moving into the White House is almost inconceivable, and the pressure to conform to the standard of the heteronormative family presumably increases for women candidates. There is evidence of this pressure, for instance, in the fact that in Hillary Clinton's first quasi-campaign autobiography *It Takes a Village* (1996), she made it clear that she would have liked to have had more than one child, but encountered fertility problems.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Kamala Harris, who does not have biological children, is careful to pose with her husband's children and to stress her caring relationship with them.<sup>25</sup>

I would hazard to say that the pressure for candidates to present a traditional family alongside other credentials when running for the Presidency has even increased since World War II. On the one hand, I see this as related to the dynamics that have been described as the decreasing separation of church and state that began during the Eisenhower era,<sup>26</sup> and, on the other, to the increasing importance of visual media and journalistic coverage of politicians' private lives. In light of the gender care gap, this demand to present a child or children to the American public disadvantages women once again.

The notion that candidates running for political office need to project a certain image of themselves that makes them likeable to voters is directly related

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23 Wikipedia, "List of children of presidents of the United States," Wikipedia, n.d., [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_children\\_of\\_presidents\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_children_of_presidents_of_the_United_States).

24 Hillary Clinton, *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 2.

25 Her official White House portrait suggests that Harris and her husband Emhoff "have a large blended family that includes their children, Ella and Cole," which may be read as masking the fact that they are not Harris' biological children. The White House, "Kamala Harris," n.d., <https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/vice-president-harris/>. However, her projection of a 'blended' family can also be read more progressively. Jessica Bennet, "Kamala Harris Will Make History. So Will Her 'Big, Blended' Family," *The New York Times*, January 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/17/us/kamala-harris-doug-emhoff-family-inauguration.html>.

26 Annika Brockschmidt, *Amerikas Gotteskrieger* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 2021), 42–44.

to the third major area in which women candidates face particular structural barriers: media and the framing of their personalities and appearance. Personality and appearance are often measured in terms of the degree to which they cohere with traditional ideas of femininity and are seen in relation to candidates' competence to fill a position of power. Statistical data shows that gender, appearance, and personality traits are mentioned in news coverage of female candidates at a much higher rate than male candidates.<sup>27</sup>

When commenting on women's personalities, it is important to note that women are subject to the so-called likeability bias. Not only do they need to seem competent and presidential in the eyes of voters, but also likeable as people. This bias does not apply to male candidates, or does so to a far lesser extent.<sup>28</sup> Stereotypically, women should be likeable and pleasing, even when they lead. Recent studies show that women candidates are often characterized as un-likeable, as "nasty," "angry," or "strident,"<sup>29</sup> and as lacking warmth.<sup>30</sup> As the Center for American Women and Politics notes, in 2020, "women candidates and commentators alike pushed back against these characterizations more overtly than in past presidential contexts, both justifying their passion ... and pointing out the gendered roots of these attacks."<sup>31</sup> Thus, while women still have to work harder on their images than male candidates do and are more likely to face attacks on their characters, their ability to counter these attacks has also increased as public awareness and rejection of sexism has increased.

Next to personality, physical appearance is central to a candidates' public image. Despite the data that shows that women candidate's physical appearance is commented on much more frequently than men's,<sup>32</sup> some recent studies and articles have claimed that men face very similar criticism. Such studies suggest that men and women candidates are currently evenly matched

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27 Erin Cassese et al. "Media Coverage of Female Candidates' Traits in the 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 43, no. 1 (2021): 42–63; John Kohn Bowden, "Female 2020 candidates attacked online more than men: analysis," *The Hill*, November 5, 2019, <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/468991-fe-male-2020-candidates-attacked-online-more-than-men-analysis/>.

28 Center for American Women and Politics, "Tracking Gender in the 2020 Presidential Election," n.d., <https://womenrun.rutgers.edu/2020-presidential/>.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Cassese et al. "Media Coverage of Female Candidates' Traits."

31 Center for American Women and Politics, "Tracking Gender in the 2020 Presidential Election."

32 Cassese et al. "Media Coverage of Female Candidates' Traits."

in the kinds of humiliating comments and gender stereotyping they have to bear, overlook, or actively confront and ideally dispel.<sup>33</sup> Remarks about Chris Christie's weight, Ron DeSantis' choice of boots, and Pete Buttigieg's youthfulness are cited as cases in point.<sup>34</sup> Candidates who were elected President had to bear demeaning treatments of their bodies, too. Obama was seen as having too skinny legs to govern.<sup>35</sup> Trump's hands were repeatedly commented on as too small, an insult directly related to Stormy Daniels' description of his penis as "mushroom shaped" on Jimmy Kimmel.<sup>36</sup>

Men's appearances, their bodies and sartorial choices, may matter more today than some decades ago. But I want to stress that when "bodies are interpreted as sites of leadership,"<sup>37</sup> men's bodies are clearly measured against an ideal of the broad-shouldered ruler and statesman, and sexual prowess is connected to political power. Women's appearances, by contrast, are measured up against their sexual desirability as seen by men. Sexual desirability is connected not to their potential political power but to their sexual submission and availability to men. In other words, commentary on a male candidate's appearance may be negative and thereby make the candidate look less able to govern, but commentary on a female candidate's appearance, whether positive or negative, almost always makes her look less able to govern, as it reduces her to the question of desirability.

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- 33 Diane Bystrom et al. *Gender and Candidate Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, *Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 34 Kathleen Dolan and Jennifer Lawless, "Gender Bias in Primary Elections? Survey Says No," National Capital Area Political Science Association's American Politics Workshop, June 6, 2023, [https://www.dannyhayes.org/uploads/6/9/8/5/69858539/dolan\\_and\\_lawless\\_ncapsa\\_paper.pdf](https://www.dannyhayes.org/uploads/6/9/8/5/69858539/dolan_and_lawless_ncapsa_paper.pdf), 2.
- 35 Greta Olson, "Weighing in on Obama: Connections between Embodiment, Class, and Masculinity in the United States and Germany," in *Obama and the Paradigm Shift: Measuring Change*, eds. Birte Christ and Greta Olson (Heidelberg: Winter, 2012), 105–39, 106–109.
- 36 Nate Hopper, "Why You Shouldn't Laugh at Donald Trump's Hands," *Time*, October 20, 2016, <https://time.com/4539487/donald-trump-small-hands/>; Matt Wilstein, "Stormy Daniels Picks Trump's Tiny 'Mushroom' Penis From a Lineup on Kimmel," *Daily Beast*, October 3, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/stormy-daniels-picks-trumps-tiny-mushroom-penis-from-a-lineup-on-kimmel>.
- 37 Ryan Neville-Shepard and Meredith Neville-Shepard, "The Pornified Presidency: Hyper-Masculinity and the Pornographic Style in U.S. Political Rhetoric," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 7 (2021): 1193–1208, 1198.

Examples of objectifying commentaries on women candidates abound. I will take up some that were made about Hillary Clinton, Nikki Haley, and Kamala Harris later to show that women candidates are increasingly and successfully pushing back against such objectification. Polls shows that such pushback resonates with voters because they are increasingly aware of and opposed to sexist reporting. A Pew research poll found that American voters are highly aware of the difference in coverage of male and female candidates. Sixty-two percent of those polled said that there was too much focus on women's appearance, while only thirty-five percent saw reporting on men to focus too much on their appearance; forty-seven percent said there is too much focus on women's personality, while thirty-nine percent said so for men. It is not clear how much sexist media framings actually hurt candidates once they run because a large percentage of voters consciously rejects a focus on personality and appearance and is aware of the gender differences in reporting. This is corroborated by the instances in which Clinton, Haley, and Harris were subjected to sexist commentary, pushed back against that commentary, and received public praise for pushing back.

In summary, first, actual competency and funding disadvantages for women candidates have largely disappeared. Second, other structural problems persist, like party support, incumbency rates, and resources such as time. Third, sexist media framings may increasingly cut two ways in the sense that a part of the electorate may see through them and support a female candidate even more strongly when they become the victim of such attacks. What this means is that the barriers for a woman to become President of the United States are largely entry-level barriers. At lower levels of the federal and state governments, fewer women run and gain access to politics. Women are thus less well represented in Congress, and fewer are able to take the prerequisite career steps for a candidacy. Yet, what is important to note is that, at state and Congress level, "If women run, they win."<sup>38</sup> When women have surmounted the entrance level obstacles, neither fundraising challenges nor sexist attitudes and media reporting make them less successful in winning seats in state governments or Congress than their male counterparts. The vexing issue is that in presidential primaries and races over the past two decades, women have run, but have *not* won.

This relates to the fourth area in which women candidate are subject to disadvantages, which is, as I have suggested above, the publics' views on their

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38 Thomas, "Introduction," 6.

electability. At the level of presidential primaries and races, it is electability bias that has prevented women candidates from succeeding. Electability bias is tied to concerns about competency, and there are two points worth mentioning. First, as long as there are no role models for women's presidential success, women who run have to wage two campaigns at once, one for their specific platform and one to make the case that they can be President as a woman.<sup>39</sup> Second, electability bias is tricky because it is not about whether voters actually believe a woman candidate is fit for office and should be President, but about what voters believe other voters believe. Even when voters personally support a woman candidate, if they doubt that others will support her and that she cannot win, they tend not to vote for that candidate for fear that their vote will be lost.

Recent studies show that electability bias is very much present among current voters. Women and candidates from minorities are perceived as less electable and thus less likely to win; ideologically extreme candidates are, similarly problematically, perceived as more electable.<sup>40</sup> So-called 'magic wand' surveys in the 2020 primaries showed that if voters could magically pick a President, more voters would have chosen Elizabeth Warren and Amy Klobuchar than would have voted for them in the actual elections. The 'magic wand gap' between the desired candidate and the candidate voters would actually vote for widened between the polls conducted in January 2020 and those conducted towards the end of the primary races in July 2020. This signals that electability bias becomes more influential as the general election gets closer, and the question of victory or defeat for one's party's candidate, becomes more prominent.

At the same time, Joe Biden benefitted immensely from electability bias in 2020. Many more voters said they would vote for him than wished for him to magically become President, and that gap, too, increased in his favor between January and June of that year.<sup>41</sup> Other studies were similarly able to link

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39 Center for American Women and Politics, "Tracking Gender in the 2020 Presidential Election."

40 Hans J.G. Hassel and Neil Visalvanich, "Perceptions of Electability: Candidate (and Voter) Ideology, Race, and Gender," *Political Behavior* (Berlin: Springer Link, 2024), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11109-023-09909-3>; Center for American Women and Politics, "Tracking Gender in the 2020 Presidential Election."

41 Mark White, "Ambivalent Support, Part 2: Supporting A Non-Preferred Candidate," Data for Progress, February 3, 2020, <https://www.dataforprogress.org/blog/2020/2/3/ambivalent-support-part-2-supporting-a-non-preferred-candidate>.

electability bias to voting behavior in the 2020 presidential primaries.<sup>42</sup> Robb Willer and his team were able to show that electability bias is not reduced when voters are presented with evidence that a woman is ready to serve as President, but only when they are presented with evidence that she would receive as much support from voters as male candidates. Electability bias or, as one commentary has it, “groupthink” appears to be the key factor that prevents women candidates from becoming their party’s nominee and running for the Presidency.<sup>43</sup>

### Hillary Clinton’s Candidacies in 2008 and 2016

In order to understand how American politics arrived at a political climate in 2020 in which, in theory, things never looked more promising for electing a woman President, it is important to go back to Clinton’s trailblazing campaigns and understand how the typical barriers to women’s success played out in her case. When Hillary Clinton campaigned in the Democratic primaries in 2008, it was perhaps the first moment in American politics in which a female candidate stood a chance to win the primaries and rise to the Presidency. She had been First Lady of the United States from 1992 to 2000, and United States Senator of New York since 2001. She combined the highest possible level of name recognition on the federal level from her husband’s presidency with all the baggage that came with that not-so-unproblematic legacy. It is no coincidence that the first woman who stood a chance could not truly do this in her own right, but relied on or was inadvertently connected to her husband’s achievements. Historically, it is not uncommon that access to political office for women comes via their husbands, as women have often gained seats in Congress that were previously held by their husbands. As late as 1978, Nancy Landon Kassebaum became the first woman who was elected to the Senate without her husband having preceded her.<sup>44</sup>

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42 Christianne Corbett et al. “Pragmatic bias impedes women’s access to political leadership,” *PNAS* 119, no.6 (2022); Melissa De Witte, “Groupthink gone wrong: Stanford scholars show how assumptions about electability undermine women political candidates,” *Stanford Report*, February 2, 2022, <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2022/02/groupthink-gone-wrong-assumptions-electability-undermine-women-political-candidates>.

43 Melissa De Witte, “Groupthink gone wrong.”

44 Sielke, “Stronger Together,” 10.

During her campaign, Clinton had to face issues of likeability and sexist attacks on both her competency and appearance. One of the key moments in her campaign was a New Hampshire rally in January 2008, when two rally participants held up a huge sign that said “Iron My Shirt.” Clinton took on this interruption directly by saying, “Ah, the remnants of sexism – alive and well.” She continued, “As I think has been abundantly demonstrated, I am also running to break through the highest and hardest glass ceiling,” and joked later that, “If there’s anyone left in the auditorium who wants to learn how to iron a shirt, I’ll talk about that.”<sup>45</sup>

This incident is evidence of how sexist attacks on women candidates cut two ways and do not necessarily work towards the candidate’s disadvantage any longer. The rally participants who display sexism openly and demand that Clinton stay in what they consider a woman’s proper place, such as behind an ironing board in the service of men, are a reality and may find sympathizers among the other participants and across the political spectrum. However, by 2008, Clinton was able to call out the protesters as sexist and deflate their ideas as backwards and absurd. The applause that followed Clinton’s rebuttal to the rally participants and the later public debate about the incident confirms the idea that a majority of voters are aware and critical of sexism in politics. Paradoxically, such incidents may boost women’s candidacies at least as much as they hurt them because they work to rally supporters closer around their cause.

In 2008, Senator Barack Obama ultimately won the Democratic nomination. The reasons for his win are multiple and have to do with the individuals competing in the race and not just structural issues of gender. Clinton went on to become Obama’s Secretary of State and, in 2016, to win the Democratic primaries against five other candidates, including Bernie Sanders, who scored particularly well with younger Democrats. She thus overcame the biggest obstacle for women running for the nomination of their party: electability bias. Despite eight years of a Democratic White House, economic and political factors made it look like the U.S. would elect another Democratic President, which

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45 Sarah Wheaton, “Iron My Shirt,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2008, <https://archive.nytimes.com/thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/07/iron-my-shirt/>; bellantoni-washtimes, “Clinton to ‘Iron my shirt’ protester: Sexism rampant,” YouTube, January 7, 2008, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=df7DEw13VqM&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nieuwnieuws.nl%2Farchives%2Fvideo%2F2008%2F01%2Fman\\_tegen\\_clinton\\_strijk\\_mijn.html](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=df7DEw13VqM&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nieuwnieuws.nl%2Farchives%2Fvideo%2F2008%2F01%2Fman_tegen_clinton_strijk_mijn.html), 2:10; For an account of that incidence, see also Fitzpatrick, *The Highest Glass Ceiling*, 1–3.

would have been an unusual feat in itself. Over the past 150 years, no Democratic President has succeeded another Democratic President except after the deaths in office of Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. Given this pattern, it was particularly noteworthy that Americans voted, by a majority of almost three million votes, for Hillary Clinton.

It is true that she did not become President, and her defeat in the Electoral College lingers on problematically in the minds of voters and continues to shape electability bias. But her winning is important to my argument, because it demonstrates that all barriers to a woman becoming President had been done away with by 2016, including the electability bias. Americans were convinced a woman could do the job and also believed that their fellow voters shared that conviction. As breakdowns of 2016 voting behavior according to gender, race, age, and class show, the Americans who made Clinton's success possible were overwhelmingly women of color.<sup>46</sup> Generally, women decide elections because their turnout is consistently higher than men's by about three percentage points.<sup>47</sup>

Clinton carried states like California and New York, where the individual vote counts less towards the Electoral College, and Trump won almost all smaller swing states, like Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.<sup>48</sup> What breakdowns of the vote also demonstrate is that Trump secured these wins in the swing states because he scored high with white older men – traditionally Republican voters – but also with white younger men.<sup>49</sup> As has been widely discussed, Trump managed to attract younger white working-class men in Midwestern states in addition to mobilizing traditional male voters, because

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46 Pew Research Center, "An examination of the 2016 electorate, based on validated voters," Pew Research Center, August 9, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters/>.

47 Center for American Women and Politics, "Gender Differences in Voter Turnout," n.d., <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/voters/gender-differences-voter-turnout#GGN>.

48 Dale R. Durran, "Whose votes count the least in the Electoral College," *The Conversation*, March 14, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/whose-votes-count-the-least-in-the-electoral-college-74280>.

49 Alec Tyson and Shiva Maniam, "Behind Trump's victory: Divisions by race, gender, education," Pew Research Center, November 9, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/>; Robert D. Francis, "Him, Not Her: Why Working-class White Men Reluctant about Trump Still Made Him President of the United States," *SOCIUS Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 4 (2018): 1–11, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2378023117736486>.

he spoke to their interests and fears.<sup>50</sup> Often without college degrees, this group of young white voters was increasingly economically insecure but also felt culturally insecure. It was experiencing a crisis of masculinity in identitarian terms.<sup>51</sup> What Trump offered was a vision of hegemonic masculinity, the idea that white, cisgender, heterosexual men would be in charge of the country again, from the White House down to the kitchen table, and that men would regain and exercise their authority over women, LGBTQ+ people, People of Color and other perceived minorities through (physical) dominance and aggression.<sup>52</sup>

It is crucial to understand these dynamics through which Trump won white male voters and through them, the Electoral College. Trump was able to widen his base during the 2024 primaries via a spreading sense of a loss of authority and power among young men. This time around, he is increasingly attracting Black and Latinx male voters on the basis of his projection of hegemonic masculinity as a principle for political and private governance. Throughout the 2016 campaign, Trump engaged in blatantly sexist attacks on Clinton, including the rallying cry “Trump that Bitch,” and behaved in a dominant masculinist way towards Clinton, such as when he physically stalked her on the debate stage. He modelled dominant masculine behavior for his prospective male voters.

The release of the Access Hollywood Tape in October 2016, one month before the election, did not turn voters off Trump, as Democrats had hoped, but instead solidified the “hypermasculine image of leadership” that he cultivated and that some voters view as aspirational.<sup>53</sup> In 2016, grievances among the electorate perceived to be related to shifting power relations between men and women in the U.S. contributed significantly to Trump’s winning the election by way of the Electoral College. This happened at the moment when gender bias

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50 Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, “The White Working Class and the 2016 Election,” *Perspectives on Politics* 19, no.1 (2020), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/abs/white-working-class-and-the-2016-election/CAA760DEBoCC41BA02ADF2131EFA508F>; Stephen L. Morgan, “Trump Voters and the White Working Class,” *Sociological Science* 5 no., 10 (2018): 234–245.

51 Myra Marx Ferree, “The Crisis of Masculinity for Gendered Democracies,” *Sociological Forum* 35 (2020): 898–917. Ferree also offers an overview over the literature on the subject to date.

52 Theresa K. Vescio and Nathaniel E.C. Schermerhorn, “Hegemonic Masculinity Predicts 2016 and 2020 Voting and Candidate Evaluations,” *PNAS* 118, no. 2 (2021), <https://www.pnas.org/doi/abs/10.1073/pnas.2020589118>.

53 Neville-Shepard, “The Pornified Presidency,” 1194.

and gender barriers that had prevented women from winning the Presidency had been overcome by Clinton in the popular vote. The desire of white, often economically disadvantaged male voters to vote for a strong man and to be like that strong man decided the election.

## The Propitious Moment of 2020

In the eyes of many voters, ‘strong man’ Trump created quite a mess out of his Presidential term. In consequence, it never looked more likely that a Democrat would be elected president than in 2020, and that it would be a woman. What made it seem so likely was, first, that feminist issues were front and center the moment Trump became the new “pussy-grabbing” President. The day after Trump’s inauguration in January 2017 saw the Women’s March on Washington, the largest feminist protest in U.S. American history. And the #MeToo movement became an important factor in public discourse.<sup>54</sup> Second, in 2020, a record number of six women entered the Democratic primaries – Tulsi Gabbard, Kirsten Gillibrand, Kamala Harris, Amy Klobuchar, Elizabeth Warren, and Marianne Williamson. All six women reached the offices they held based purely on their own achievements. They could not and did not fall back on name recognition and popularity by virtue of their husband’s achievements – a marked departure from Clinton’s earlier trailblazing candidacies. This record number of women entering the race was important to political culture also insofar as they offered not just one, but six models of women in power who campaigned in very different ways.<sup>55</sup> For instance, Elizabeth Warren campaigned on the basis of her record in consumer protection and also on the basis that she could ‘do it all’ having worked full-time while raising children.

None of these women won the nomination. Although Elizabeth Warren stayed in the race and drew seventy-nine votes at the Convention in August, the primary race came down to two white men, Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders. The fact that more women ran for the nomination than ever before is evidence that female Democrats had been emboldened by Hillary Clinton’s winning the popular vote. Still, voters did not seem convinced that it would be a good idea

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54 Center for American Women and Politics, “Tracking Gender in the 2020 Presidential Election.”

55 Ibid.

to vote for a woman. As R. J. Miller, a National Democratic committee member, said, “Democrats have internalized the Hillary Clinton lesson: that a woman can’t win.”<sup>56</sup> Miller’s phrasing suggests that, since the 2020 elections, the question of women and the Presidency has focused entirely on whether they can win, and not at all on whether they are competent to govern, or, in short, on electability. In 2020 as well as 2024, electability revolves around the question of who can beat Donald Trump.

In 2020, Biden eventually carried the nomination and went on to win the general election. Nevertheless, the moment still looked promising for women: Biden nominated Kamala Harris as his Vice President. This nomination carried symbolic weight, because she was the first woman, and the first Black American and South Asian American woman to become Vice President. Moreover, her Vice Presidency seemed to promise that the elderly President would soon make space for the first woman President. That did not happen, nor did Biden step aside from his candidacy last year to allow Harris to run for their party’s nomination. Nor has he, at this moment of writing, stepped aside after the disastrous debate on June 27, 2024. Once again, the idea that a woman cannot win stands behind Biden’s clinging to power, at least in part. Specifically, a woman cannot win against Trump.

## Where Are We Now? The 2024 Primaries and the Re-Masculinization of U.S. Politics

In 2023 and 2024, the female contenders for the Republican and Democratic Party candidacies were Nikki Haley and, indirectly, Kamala Harris, as well as outsider candidate Marianne Williamson. Both Haley and Harris have had to deal with sexist attacks and stereotyping. Haley ran on the basis of representing a new generation of leaders. She offered voters a different image than the “two grumpy old men”<sup>57</sup> vying for the nomination, not only based on her age

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56 Christopher Cadelago, “New poll goes deep on Kamala Harris’ liabilities and strengths as a potential president,” *Politico*, June 12, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/06/12/kamala-harris-favorability-poll-00162093>.

57 The Haley campaign used a meme that showed Biden and Trump and included the line “grumpy old men,” see Paul Steinhauer, “Haley targets Biden and Trump in ‘Grumpy Old Men’ spoof,” *Fox News*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/haley-targets-biden-trump-grump-old-men>.

but also due to her gender and ethnicity. In keeping with conservative Republican principles, however, Haley denied that her gender had any relevance to her campaign. Haley represented an alternative to Trump within the Republican spectrum. Yet she could not go against the aversion to identity politics that is part of the larger playing field of the culture wars and which has exacerbated political polarization. On the other hand, she also tried to play to Republican women voters, who are more likely than men to want to see a woman in the White House,<sup>58</sup> by way of tough talk, saying that it was simply time to elect a “badass woman” and playing the Sheryl Crow song “Woman in the White House” at her rallies.<sup>59</sup>

Haley was subject to sexist attacks, too. “[S]he wasn’t in her prime either,” CNN reporter Don Lemon opined after Haley had criticized Trump and Biden as old men. Lemon made things worse by discussing at what age women can be considered to be in their ‘prime.’<sup>60</sup> While Haley’s campaign attacked Biden and Trump for their age-related diminishing mental qualities, Lemon spoke about physical attractiveness as if these were equal measures of leadership potential, thereby treating Haley as a sex object rather than a candidate.

I cite the incident, because like the “Iron My Shirt” attack on Clinton in 2008, it can be seen as cutting two ways. On the one hand, Haley quite seriously pushed back against the sexist attack by saying, “By the way, I am in my prime. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise” at the next rally.<sup>61</sup> She thereby, at least implicitly, related the notion of one’s ‘prime’ to political and professional capabilities and not to appearance. On the other hand, in 2023, a statement like Lemon’s was recognized as so blatantly and outrageously sexist by a large part of the public that Haley could make fun of it. Her campaign sold drink koozies

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58 Menasce Horowitz and Goddard, “Women and Political Leadership Ahead of the 2024 Election.”

59 Dylan Wells, “Nikki Haley walks fine line on race, gender in appeal to GOP base,” *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/2023/03/20/nikki-haley-race-gender-2024-presidential-gop/>.

60 Michael M. Grynbaum and John Koblin, “Uproar Hits CNN as Don Lemon Is Rebuked for Comments About Women,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/17/business/media/cnn-don-lemon-apology.html>; Maya King, “On the Trail in South Carolina, Haley Says, ‘Yes, I Am in My Prime,’” *The New York Times*, May 5, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/05/us/politics/nikki-haley-campaign.html>.

61 Wells, “Nikki Haley walks fine line on race, gender in appeal to GOP base.”

that read “Not in my prime?” and then demanded “Hold my Beer!” on the reverse side to point out how preposterous Lemon’s comment was, thus rallying supporters around Haley by casting CNN’s sexist reporter as the enemy.

Kamala Harris’ public image has been even more fraught with negative stereotyping. Harris’ low approval ratings and her lack of likeability have been commented on continuously, and various factors have been mentioned as possible causes: her racial identity, her assignment to difficult policy issues such as immigration, and supposedly actual blunders in office.<sup>62</sup> In March of 2024, Kathleen Parker went as far as to suggest that “For the country’s sake, Harris should step aside” in *The Washington Post*. Among many potentially valid arguments, Parker criticized Harris’ laugh as a “cackle” and painted her as aggressive and careless in the face of serious politics.<sup>63</sup> The suggestion that Harris is aggressive and unethical is a pattern of negative stereotyping that researchers in media representations of women candidates have shown across the board.<sup>64</sup> Like Haley, Harris pushed back. In an interview with Drew Barrymore, Harris called out the criticism of her laugh as sexist and expressed her pride in belonging to a “community of women with big laughs.”<sup>65</sup> Again, media framings of Haley and Harris in 2024 show that sexism is “alive and well,” to use Clinton’s 2008 words, but specific incidents can also work in women candidates’ favor.

The most important fact that surveys and research on voting behavior over the past four years agree on is that a candidate’s gender has little impact on electoral behavior once they are running. In today’s polarized political

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62 Peter Slevin, “The Increasing Attacks on Kamala Harris,” *The New Yorker*, February 27, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-increasing-attacks-on-kamala-harris>.

63 Kathleen Parker, “For the country’s sake, Harris should step aside,” *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/03/15/kamala-harris-quit-biden-2024/>.

64 Center for American Women and Politics, “Tracking Gender in the 2020 Presidential Election,” n.d., <https://womenrun.rutgers.edu/2020-presidential/>; Cassese et al. “Media Coverage of Female Candidates’ Traits.”

65 Post Editorial Board, “Kamala Harris’ cackling is Joe Biden’s job security,” *New York Post*, August 28, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/08/28/kamala-harris-cackling-is-joe-bidens-job-security/>; Katelyn Caralle, “Kamala Harris says people are still getting used to a woman VP and suggest making fun of her laugh is misogynistic,” *Daily Mail*, April 28, 2024, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13359913/kamala-harris-vice-president-woman-laugh-misogynistic.html>; Northwestern Institute for Policy Research, “Are Voters Biased Against Women Candidates,” January 24, 2023, <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/news/2023/are-voters-biased-against-women-candidates.html>.

climate, the “political party has become the primary determinant of vote choice.”<sup>66</sup> Voters vote for their party, Democrat or Republican, no matter whether the candidate is a woman or man. Voter turnout similarly does not hinge on whether one’s party’s candidate is a woman or a man. Gender does not matter in elections rely not only on voter surveys, in which voters tend to reply with what they think are desirable answers, but also in actual elections. A 2024 study of primary races for open Democratic and Republican Senate seats demonstrated that women were as likely to be elected as men.<sup>67</sup> Again, nothing prevents women from reaching political office now when they run – except electability bias.

The reason why women candidates have not managed to overcome electability bias in 2020 and 2024 is, I suggest, Trump’s gendering of politics. By projecting leadership as leadership through hegemonic masculinity, Trump has succeeded in setting up the electoral competition as a vote on competing masculinities. If this competition is a given, then women – even after decades of assimilating to or negotiating masculine-defined models of leadership – are out of the race and simply cannot win. They are, on principle, not seen as electable. Trump’s setting up masculinity as *the* measure for leadership competency works on the basis of the electability bias and is the reason why Democrats did not feel that they could let a woman try to take on Trump in the primaries.

In 2024, Trump’s model of hegemonic masculinity has gained in appeal for young Black male and Latinx voters, from whom Trump is currently drawing his largest increase in support. In June 2024, a couple of days after Trump was convicted of felony crimes in New York, he made his first public appearance at an event of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), which took place in New Jersey. He announced that he would be there on X, and supporters flocked to the event. Trump’s appearance in New Jersey illustrates how he communicates a gendered model of leadership to his supporters and re-masculinizes the political arena as a whole. The UFC is an almost exclusively male event: men compete, and men make up most of the audience. The physical, masculine-coded dominance performed by the athletes is the kind of unapologetic

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66 Kathleen Dolan and Jennifer Lawless, “Gender Bias in Primary Elections? Survey Says No,” National Capital Area Political Science Association’s American Politics Workshop, June 6, 2023, [https://www.dannyhayes.org/uploads/6/9/8/5/69858539/dolan\\_and\\_lawless\\_ncapsa\\_paper.pdf](https://www.dannyhayes.org/uploads/6/9/8/5/69858539/dolan_and_lawless_ncapsa_paper.pdf), 3.

67 Dolan and Lawless, “Gender Bias in Primary Elections? Survey Says No.”

masculinity that Trump offers vicariously to his supporters – a masculinity to proudly aspire to.<sup>68</sup>

Commentators have stressed how skilled Trump has been at pointing out how the ‘left’ supposedly attacks traditional masculine identity, and he casts men as victims in the culture wars. This sense of victimhood, of loss of authority, is what he exploits when he poses as a fan of performances of aggressive, unapologetic dominance, such as at the UFC. Shortly afterwards, during a rally in Pennsylvania on July 13, 2024, Trump raised his right hand and mouthed the words “Fight! Fight! Fight!” after being shot at. He played right into the image of the fighter who literally stands up to anyone who attempts to dominate him, physically or otherwise. In the context of these intense performances of hegemonic masculinity on Trump’s part, it is not surprising that female secret service members were instantly blamed for the supposedly lax security that made the assassination attempt possible.<sup>69</sup> The kind of dominance that Trump performs serves as an aspirational model for many men. Sidelineing women is part of that hegemonic masculinity.

In a slight shift of perspective, media scholars Ryan and Meredith Neville-Shard explain Trump’s re-masculinization of the political field as a “pornification” of the field. Republican voters’ appreciation of Trump’s open sexism certifies his “authenticity as a rule-breaker”<sup>70</sup> and his anti-establishment mojo. They suggest that Trump’s sexism and rule-breaking has to be seen as taking place in a political climate in which actors increasingly draw on “narratives, metaphors, images, and frames culled from the realm of pornography.”<sup>71</sup> Trump successfully asserts a “hypermasculine image of leadership” that is not only modelled on warriors and fighters, such as those at the UFC, but “that combines the kind of sexism and machismo found in pornographic culture.”<sup>72</sup> When applied to politics the “pornification frame” leaves little space for women other than in the roles of those subordinated to hypermasculine dominance and sexual aggression. While that frame erodes women’s

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68 Michelle Cottle and Carlos Lozada, “The ‘Empty Suit’ of Trump’s Masculinity: Three men of Opinion debate Trump’s appeal,” *The New York Times*, Podcast, June 7, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/07/opinion/trump-biden-men-masculinity.html>.

69 Catie Edmondson, “After Trump Assassination Attempt, Right Points Finger at Female Agents,” *The New York Times*, July 16, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/16/us/politics/secret-service-female-agents.html>.

70 Neville-Shepard, “The Pornified Presidency,” 1194.

71 *Ibid.*, 1195.

72 *Ibid.*

electability by rendering them as sexual objects, it casts men in positions of power and thus creates what Ryan and Meredith Neville-Shard call “vicarious empowerment.”<sup>73</sup> Historical evidence of the power of this frame can be found in how Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky played out in the 1990s. Like the release of the Access Hollywood tape for Trump, such a sex scandal should have collapsed Clinton’s Presidency according to traditional political mores. Yet Clinton’s poll numbers instead surged. The affair turned Clinton’s public image from a soft, emasculated husband into what one commentator admiringly called “a walking erection.”<sup>74</sup>

Whether we speak of the re-masculinization or the pornification of Presidential politics, it is clear that within these frameworks, women are simply unelectable. At a moment when all barriers to the glass ceiling had disappeared, backlash culture reconfigured politics in such a way that electability bias kept women out of the races. What would it then take to combat electability bias in the current political landscape? What would it take to make what is thought of as impossible possible – a woman winning the Presidency? It takes collective action. In fact, it takes the collective belief that “yes, we can” elect a woman President.

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As this book goes to press, Joe Biden has stepped down from his candidacy for the nomination of the Democratic Party and has endorsed Kamala Harris as the new nominee. The next days will show whether we will witness an open Convention in August because too many delegates question Harris’ electability, or whether the Democrats will indeed rally behind Harris. In the spirit of this essay, I hope for the latter. While I believe that a woman cannot win in Trump’s game, I also hope that Harris will be able to change the rules – with a “yes, we can” nation behind her.

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73 *Ibid.*, 1196.

74 *Ibid.*

