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“Not Man Enough”: Masculinities and Conservatism in the United States

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Abstract

This paper argues that since the 1800s, conservative presidential candidates in the United States have deployed gendered rhetoric to suit their political goals.

In this year’s presidential election, Donald Trump used gendered language in two ways. By bragging about the size of his genitalia and his wife’s beauty, Donald Trump portrayed himself as aggressively masculine and therefore suited for power. And by promising to bring factory jobs back to the American Midwest, Trump appealed to working-class men’s masculinity and self-worth.

A similar story played out in 1856. In 1856, gender undergirded the Democratic campaign message. Democrats defined themselves as the party of “real men” by accusing Republicans of supporting women’s rights and by using masculine language to oppose Republican’s anti-slaveryism. In 1856, these tactics worked: Democrat James Buchanan won the election. But in the election of 1860, when Democrats deployed gender again, it tore the party apart. Northern and southern Democrats disagreed on what policies were manly. This made compromise nearly impossible.

The story of the Democrats in the 1850s is a cautionary tale for any politician or party who chooses to make gender an issue or use gender to argue for their policies. It demonstrates that gender is a powerful but malleable political tactic. Now that Trump has made gender as an issue, it may quickly spin out of his control.

Key Words

Conservatism, Masculinity, Donald Trump, American Civil War, Politics

“Not Man Enough”: Masculinities and Conservatism in the United States

Gender issues and gendered language featured prominently in this year’s presidential election in the United States. Donald Trump’s supporters called Hillary Clinton unlikeable, overly ambitious, and untrustworthy. They questioned her stamina.

Trump won the election. Commentators have described his victory as a backlash against feminism. But voters did not merely reject Clinton’s historic candidacy—they embraced Trump. How did Trump use masculinity to appeal to voters? And can we expect aggressively masculine language to bolster Trump during his presidency and into 2020?

An analysis of the elections of 1856 and 1860 can help us answer these questions. First, I will describe how Trump deployed gender in the election of 2016. Then, I will turn to historical newspapers to talk about the elections of 1856 and 1860. In 1856, the Democratic Party—then the conservative party—defined itself as the party of “real men” to unite its members when they were otherwise profoundly divided over slavery. The tactic worked: Democrat James Buchanan won the election. But Democrats had opened a Pandora’s box. Describing policy in terms of manliness made disagreements seem more profound, compromise unbearable, and defeat unthinkable. As a result, the masculine language that united the Democratic Party in 1856 ripped the party in two in 1860. Finally, I will apply these findings to offer some hypotheses about the role masculinity will play in politics over the next four years. Ultimately, I argue that the elections of 1856 and 1860 show that politicians should be wary of deploying gender as tactic to win elections. On the one hand, gender can galvanize support for the candidate and the party’s platform. On the other hand, however, a person or party that deploys gender risks having the same tactic turned against them in the future.

2016

Throughout the campaign season, Donald Trump used gender in two ways. First, he portrayed himself as a model of hegemonic masculinity, which implied he was a natural leader. Second, he supported policies that would help white working class voters reclaim their own sense of manhood and self-worth.

Donald Trump portrayed himself as masculine and emasculated other men. One much-talked-about exchange occurred during the Republican debate held on March 3, 2016. Donald Trump repeated the nickname, “little Marco,” that he had recently given to his competitor for the Republican nomination, Marco Rubio. The nickname indicated that Rubio’s height—five feet and ten inches—made him less of a man than Trump. Trump continued on to assert his own masculinity by promising viewers that he had a large penis. “I guarantee you there’s no problem,” he said. “I guarantee”(Gregory Krieg 2016). Gender is a relationship of power, and we associate hegemonic masculinity with the right to power (R.W. Connell 2005). Penis size is a way of asserting masculinity. Therefore, by hinting that his penis was bigger than Rubio’s, Trump implied that he was more of a man and thus had more of a right to political power than Rubio did.

Trump also portrayed himself as a man in relationship to other women. For one, he used his wife as an object to bolster his own masculinity. When a supporter tweeted a photo of Trump’s wife, a former model, next to an unflattering photo of Republican candidate Ted Cruz’s wife, Trump retweeted it, including the caption “The images are worth a thousand words”(Bryan Logan 2016). Sociologist Michael Kimmel has demonstrated that men use women’s beauty to prove their own masculinity. “Catching” an attractive woman—as if she is a thing to be caught—increases men’s standing among other men (Michael Kimmel 2008). Trump used the side-by-side comparison to bolster his

masculinity and, in turn, his claim to power. The now-famous "grab them by the pussy" comment worked to a similar end.

In exchanges with powerful women, Trump repeatedly denigrated women as emotional and irrational. This implied that Trump, by contrast, was reasonable—a masculine trait—which justified his claim to power. Take, for instance, his reaction to Republican debate moderator Megyn Kelley in August 2015. Kelley pushed Trump with a line of questioning during the debate. In the days after the debate, Trump cried that there had been "blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever"(Philip Rucker 2015). This implied that Kelley was menstruating, and therefore that emotion, not reason, had driven her questions. Once he received the Republican nomination, Trump deployed similar tactics on Clinton. In September 2016, Clinton caught pneumonia. Trump released a campaign ad that warned, "Clinton does not have the fortitude, strength, or stamina to lead in our world"(Chris Cillizza 2016). Fortitude, strength, and stamina imply masculinity. The ad implied that as a woman, Clinton did not and could not possess these qualities. Therefore, according to Trump's campaign, Clinton's gender—not her bout with pneumonia—disqualified her from the presidency.

Trump also made policies that supported men's masculinity the centerpiece of his campaign. Midwestern states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota—the so-called "Rust Belt"—have been hard hit by the decline in manufacturing in the United States. Trump promised to push for policies that would stanch this decline, including ripping up free trade agreements, imposing a tariff on cheap Chinese steel, and building a wall between the United States and Mexico. Rust Belt voters responded to these proposals, flipping economically poor and culturally working class counties from Democratic in 2012 to Republican in 2016 (Michael McQuarrie 2016). Trump offered few specifics to back his proposals. Why did voters support him nonetheless? Historian John Tosh argues that masculinity is a social status that is demonstrated, in part, through a man's ability to work and provide for his family (John Tosh 1994, 184–88). In the Rust Belt, the decline in manufacturing has left men out of work. This has challenged men's masculinity. So, when Trump visited a former steel town in Pennsylvania and promised to "create massive numbers of jobs," men heard not just that they would have the chance not just to make money, but also to recapture their sense of manliness and therefore their self-worth ("Full Transcript: Donald Trump's Jobs Plan Speech" 2016).

1856

For years before 1856, the Democratic Party had avoided dealing with its members' divisions over slavery. Some northern Democrats wanted to limit slavery's expansion.[i] Other, southern Democrats argued that slavery was a positive good. They believed that no western territory should be allowed to ban slavery. Moderate Democrats tried to split the difference. They wanted to do away with the issue by allowing settlers in each territory to decide for themselves whether to allow slavery—a solution dubbed popular sovereignty. But the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and the ensuing violence in Kansas put slavery once more to the top of the political agenda. Democrats headed into the 1856 campaign season divided over the central issue of the election.

In 1856, northern and southern Democrats wished to unite the party. As a result, Democrats from both sections depicted themselves as conservatives on gender issues and Republicans as dangerous radicals. Democrats used gender in three distinct but related ways. One of these was to criticize Republican nominee John Frémont and his wife Jessie's marriage and personal habits. Second, Democrats associated the Republican Party with the women's rights and free love movements. Third, Democrats argued that abolitionism was at once the source of all Republican gender radicalism and its most terrifying manifestation. Together, these three tactics helped Democrats define what they stood for: patriarchy, social order, racial hierarchy, and union. Gendered images also unified Democrats by defining what they stood against: woman's rights, abolitionism, and disunion.

Similar to Trump's tactics in 2016, Democrats used gendered language to emasculate their opponent, John C. Frémont. Frémont and his wife Jessie were the model of a modern, progressive couple. John was ardently opposed to slavery, and Jessie was the model of a progressive wife: beautiful and domestic, but also an intelligent and trusted advisor.[ii] Newspapers from New York to Georgia ridiculed Frémont's hairstyle, which was thick, wavy, and parted in the middle, as "the feminine arrangement of his locks"(*The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 1856). By making fun of Frémont's hairstyle, Democratic newspapers slurred Republican men as feminine. They also implied that real men should vote Democratic.[iii] Democrats also criticized Jessie's involvement in her husband's campaign. After her husband gave a speech at their house in New York, Jessie came out on the balcony to acknowledge the crowd below. A Democratic newspaper decried interval before Jessie appeared as a mere "pretense of holding back—a sham of coyness." This was no retiring true woman. The *Enquirer* insinuated that Jessie relished her role as "the feminine partner in the business" (*The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* 1856a). Jessie's independence indicted John's masculinity as much as it did Jessie's femininity. It implied that John, whom Democrats frequently emasculated as the "husband of Jessie," could not control his wife (*The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* 1856b). This made him less of a man and less deserving of holding power. It also indicated that he would be too weak to control a country—especially one being torn apart by divisions over slavery.

The second way Democrats used gender against Republicans was by accusing them of supporting women's rights and free love. A very small women's rights movement had existed in America since the 1840s. Democrats, however, ignored the facts and falsely accused all Republicans of supporting women's rights. In one typical article, the *Richmond Enquirer* reported that among liberal northern circles, "women wear masculine attire, preach infidel sermons, abuse the constitution and the marriage tie, and yet do not lose caste in society." The article continued on to link these radicals to the Republican Party, warning that "Frémont is run. . .as the anti-marriage and anti-female virtue candidate" (*The Richmond Enquirer* 1856). According to Democrats, a Republican president would support liberalized divorce laws and women's involvement in public life. This would threaten patriarchy and, in so doing, further

destabilize an already divided nation. Democrats manufactured this supposed threat to patriarchy to unite their voters against the Republican Party in 1856.

The third and final way Democrats used gender in the election of 1856 was to link it to the central issue of the campaign: slavery. The Republican Party's platform stated that it would forbid the expansion of slavery to new territories—not that it would abolish slavery everywhere. Indeed, in the abolitionist movement in the United States was small and not growing. But the few abolitionists there were supported the Republican Party. So, as they had done with women's rights, Democrats claimed that the entire Republican Party wanted to abolish slavery. They decried abolitionism as the most horrifying example of Republicans' commitment to freedom for everyone from women to slaves. The *Southern Banner*, a Democratic newspaper out of Athens, Georgia, reported on an abolitionist meeting in Chicago. White men, their wives, and their daughters attended the meeting alongside black men. Moreover, the *Banner* reported that those "fair white maidens" had cheered at the blurring of "the distinction between the white and black races" (*Southern Banner* 1856). Democrats portrayed Republicans as abolitionists. They argued that Republicans would not only support freedom for blacks, but freedom for women to participate in politics and even marry black men. Democrats, on the other hand, opposed abolitionism. Southern Democrats took this to mean white men should be able to own slaves, while northern Democrats believed white men should be able to vote on whether to allow slavery. But both positions supported white men's prerogative to control the destiny of their families and of the country.

In sum, in 1856, Democrats painted Republicans as radicals on gender issues. Democrats claimed that John and Jessie Frémont, women's rights, and—most horrifyingly—abolitionism demonstrated Republicans' impulse to free women and blacks from white men's control. Democrats had turned white patriarchy into a cohesive agenda. On November 4, 1856, voters rewarded the Democratic Party, easily electing Buchanan over Frémont.

1860

The Democratic Party's unity was fleeting. Democrats' use of gender in 1856 backfired in 1860. In 1856, Democrats had banded together as men to oppose women's rights and abolitionism. But in 1860, they turned these gendered arguments back on each other. Two opposing political goals emerged within the Democratic Party. Both sides used masculinity to bolster their arguments against each other. Southern Democrats insisted on evermore protections for slavery. They argued the chance to own slaves was part of being a man. They nominated John C. Breckinridge. Northern Democrats still wanted voters to decide whether to retain slavery. They argued that further compromise with southerners would threaten their very manhood. They nominated Stephen A. Douglas. Gender tactics amplified the growing political differences in the Democratic Party.

In 1860, northern Democrats needed to beat back Republican advances in the North. Democratic congressmen from northern states had lost their seats to Republicans in the 1854-55 midterms, many of them by wide margins. Northern Democrats needed to convince voters that Republican nominee Abraham Lincoln was radical and untrustworthy and that Douglas, their nominee, was conservative and reliable. To accomplish this goal, Democrats reprised their argument from 1856: that a Republican president would use the federal government to institute a radical social order of women's rights and abolition. In May 1860, a reporter at the Republican National Convention wrote that "there were the same gaunt philosophers who suggest bran bread and free love—the same. . . terribly plain spinsters, and the same old ladies, nodding behind the inevitable spectacles"(*Wisconsin Daily Patriot* 1860). These women only accounted for a fraction of the convention's attendees. No matter: the mere fact that unattractive, radical women attended the convention was enough for Democrats to condemn Republicans by association. And a Democratic political cartoon from the campaign depicted Lincoln supported by a line of social radicals, from a women's rights activist to a free black man. Republicans claimed they did not support abolition. But if Republicans supported freedom for women, could voters really believe that Republicans did not support freedom for slaves, too?

But 1860, northern Democrats additionally needed to convince northern and southern voters not to capitulate and vote for Breckinridge, the southern Democrats' separate candidate. They did this by portraying northern Democrats as real men. A Democratic paper in Wisconsin praised the northern Democrats who refused to vote for Breckinridge for having "back-bone enough to rebuke and put down all such insolence." This equates manliness—"back bone"—with refusal to compromise. And if northern Democrats accepted Breckinridge, they would "surrender both honor and manhood"(*Wisconsin Patriot* 1860). By associating intransigence with masculinity, the paper encouraged voters to support northern Democrat Stephen Douglas. But at the same time, that language limited political options for northern Democrats who might have wanted to find common ground with southerners. It demanded they choose between their politics and their manhood.

Southern Democrats, for their part, refused to countenance the idea of a northerner as president. They used gender to whip up support for their candidate, southerner John C. Breckinridge. One way southern Democrats did this was by describing their northern counterparts as excessively aggressive. A representative article claimed that Douglas would force the South to endure "outrage on her person, property, or honor"(*The Constitution* 1860b). If they were to be men, southern Democrats had to stand up to northern aggression.

Southern Democrats also used gendered language to discourage moderate southerners from compromising with or voting for Stephen Douglas. In May 1860, then-Senator Jefferson Davis avowed that capitulating on the slavery question "would be to sink in the scale of manhood" and "to make our posterity so degraded that they would curse this generation"(*The Constitution* 1860a). According to Davis, compromise would emasculate not only southern Democrats, but their sons and grandsons. The use of the word "degrade" is significant: it is the same word contemporaries used to describe the state of a woman who had been sexually assaulted. Davis' language limited southerners' options. Southern men could either support Breckinridge or become as powerless as a woman who had been raped. This made voting for Breckinridge seem like the only manly choice.

Finally, just as Donald Trump did in 2016, southern Democrats used women as objects to define and bolster their own masculinity. Southern women writers such as Mary Schoolcraft described southern women as pure, religious, and happy in the home—paragons of femininity. Democrats called on voters to protect those women—real and symbolic—from supposed northern aggression. One Houston newspaper insisted that if Lincoln were elected, "our property is to be despoiled, our houses burned over our heads. . .our wives and daughters ravished, and the sanctity of our homes invaded"(*Tri-Weekly Telegraph* 1860). Southerners believed that if Lincoln or Douglas were elected, abolitionists would encourage a slave rebellion. Slave rebellions, they believed, led to the rape of white women by black men. Therefore, southern men had to defend southern women by voting for Breckinridge now, and being willing to take up arms later.

To summarize: in 1856, Democrats from the North and South used gender in the same way—to paint Republicans as radicals on gender issues. Doing so helped them paper over their disagreements on slavery. It turned a policy debate between northern and southern Democrats into a culture war between Democrats and Republicans. That worked in 1856. In 1860, it backfired. In 1860, northern and southern Democrats had developed different goals and different policy ideas. Then, they tied those positions to masculinity. They argued that being a man required voting for their candidate and refusing to compromise with the other side. The hyper-masculine rhetoric solidified the rift in the Democratic Party. Northern and southern Democrats split the vote, and Lincoln won the election.

Toward 2020

Democrats pitched themselves and their policies as masculine, and this contributed their downfall in 1860. What can this tell us about Donald Trump, the Republican Party, and masculinity in the years to come? I would argue that by making gender an issue, Trump has opened the same Pandora's box Democrats did in 1856. Trump has created potential problems for himself on two fronts.

Trump justified his claim to power by portraying himself as aggressively masculine. This opened the door for Democrats as well as other Republicans to claim power by appealing to other masculinities. We can already see a difference between the way Trump and Obama portray their masculinity in relationship to women. In a 1994 interview, Trump said of his wife, "When I come home and dinner's not ready, I go through the roof" (Emily Crockett 2016). Trump has established his masculinity by marrying beautiful women and then asserting himself as the dominant partner in the relationship. Since many voters equate masculinity with leadership and power, this hyper-masculine relationship style bolsters Trump's claim to be a strong and powerful leader.

Democrat Barack Obama, on the other hand, met his wife when she was his boss at their Chicago law firm. Though she gave up her job to become first lady, their relationship seems egalitarian and respectful. Obama's marriage demonstrates that he is manly enough not to feel threatened by equality with his wife and with women in general. It also dovetails with his progressive views on other issues. In 1856, John Frémont's relatively egalitarian marriage indicated that he was not threatened by his wife Jessie's popularity. That position aligned with Republicans' progressive views on slavery. The Frémonts' marriage bolstered John's claim to being a true progressive leader, just as the Obamas' marriage does for Barack. By making his traditional marriage part of his appeal, Trump has broadened the divide between himself and liberals, turning their differences into ones not just of policy but of culture.

Even other Republicans have split with Trump on what form of masculinity justifies power. When news outlets released tapes of Trump bragging about groping women, establishment Republicans clambered to disavow the comment. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan said, "I am sickened by what I heard today. Women are to be championed and revered, not objectified" (Mike DeBonis and Abby Phillip 2016). And Utah representative Jason Chaffetz said he could not look his 15-year-old daughter in the eye and tell her he still supported Trump (Josh Levin 2016). By rushing to women's defense, Ryan and Chaffetz presented Republican voters with a different, paternalistic masculinity. This masculinity envisions women as fundamentally different from and weaker than men. According to Ryan and Chaffetz, a real man valorizes this difference and protects women. Though softer than Trump's aggressive masculinity, this paternalistic vision nonetheless justifies men's political power by portraying men as stronger than women and therefore as natural leaders. This paternalism gives Republican voters a way to feel like they are voting for a man without having to choose between aligning themselves with Trump or switching to the Democratic Party.

More subtly, Trump used gender to sell his anti-globalization economic policies. This was a risky move. As we saw with the Democrats in 1860, pitching a policy as manly raises the political stakes. Northern Democrats claimed voting on slavery was manly, southern Democrats claimed owning slaves was manly. When a northerner won the election, southern Democrats feared not just for the opportunity to own slaves but for what losing slavery would mean for them as white men. Trump may face a similar problem. He promised his supporters that he would build a wall on the border with Mexico and remove the United States from the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). He said these policies would bring back factory jobs—jobs that had undergirded men's masculinity and sense of self-worth. But what will happen if Trump fails to build the wall, to rescind NAFTA, to bring back men's jobs? He will have failed not just to implement a policy, but to support men in their traditional roles as men. This could undercut his support in the 2018 midterms or the 2020 presidential election.

The story of the Democrats in the 1850s is a cautionary tale for any politician or party who chooses to make gender an issue or use gender to argue for their policies. In 1856, Democrats deployed these gender tactics for the first time in an American election, and they won the presidency. But in 1860, the party turned on itself, and that gendered language only made those divisions more difficult to resolve. These elections demonstrate that gender is a powerful but malleable political tactic. Now that Donald Trump has raised gender—and especially masculinity—as an issue, it may quickly spin out of his control.

[i] For more on the split in the Democratic Party, see Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[ii] For more on gender and the Republican Party, see (Pierson 2003, 115–38). In his monograph on gender and anti-slavery in the 1856 campaign, Michael D. Pierson argues that "one can argue that antislavery activity increased in large degree because slavery became more incongruous to northern family ideals as that region underwent the alterations" of separate spheres and development of "restrained manhood" (18). On Jessie Frémont, Pierson argues that conservative Republicans appreciated her beauty and domestic talent; more liberal Republicans emphasized that she was intelligent and advised her husband on political matters. See Micheal D. Pierson, *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[iii] Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover argue that "manhood did not exist except in contrast to womanhood." Thus, Frémont's hair marked him out as unmanly because his appearance did not contrast sufficiently with a woman's (or so Democrats implied). See Glover, *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South*, xiii.

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