Stereotypes, Character Assassination and Women in Politics

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Abstract

How are gender stereotype cues used to target women in power in contemporary politics? There are commonalities across cases where the female politicians' image and reputation are being targeted by political rivals. For instance, stereotypes are often invoked, as products of shared cultural knowledge. Various forms of political communication, e.g., in election campaigns, often with the aim of character assassination (CA from hereon), may deploy stereotypical cues to achieve impact in this regard. Online micro-targeting creates a new platform for political strategists to practice CA and stereotype activation. Female candidates do participate in elections, raise campaign funds, and win elections; yet women remain underrepresented at all levels of elected office. It is interesting to observe the role of gender stereotypes in this process and the current challenges female candidates face. The research presented in this paper illustrates the stereotypical cues used to target women in politics, and highlights various gender-specific political obstacles to the success of female candidates.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, women in politics, character assassination, gender and microtargeting

Introduction

The third wave of feminism brought an increasing number of female candidates running for office. Starting with women's suffrage movements and the fight for the right to vote, to the actual right to vote, women's liberation movements pushed the narrative that "the personal is political." Just a century has passed since women worldwide started to gain

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the right to vote, and another fifty years was needed for the political competition to open up to female candidates. Economic prosperity and the necessity for households of earning two incomes, normalized the role of women working. It was only logical to see more and more women as policy-makers and holding executive power. Female candidates do participate in elections, raise funds successfully to this end, and even win elections, yet they remain underrepresented at all levels of elected office to this day.

In the course of campaigning and elections, politicians become public figures and are thus targets of open discussion, evaluation, and judgement. With more women in politics, this affects the way campaign strategies are planned and implemented. The triggering of the gender based stereotypes and attempts at character assassination are often viable political marketing strategies. Unlike male politicians, women never have the privilege of being able to ignore the subject of their gender. Willingly or not, they "run as a woman."

Character assassination (CA) represents the deliberate destruction of an individuals' reputation or credibility through attacks aiming at real or perceived character traits (CARP, 2017). CA mainly focuses on personal/individual attacks and stands on three pillars: attacker, method (how the attack is implemented) and target. Widely used throughout history, CA can target all kinds of people. As reputation and credibility are one of the bases for professional advancement, targeting these two intangible aspects may become crucial, especially in the political arena. The fragility of the political image and the complexity of refuting claims efficiently are core components of the process. In the contemporary political environment, a politician's reputation is built in debates over narratives rather than as the result of detailed policy analyses.

This is not lost on forces of contemporary populism. The widely-used academic definition of populism was coined by Cas Mudde, and explains it as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004: 543). Mudde later elaborated on the broader importance of populism as a defining concept of our age (Mudde, 2018). Political scientists observe an increased use of populistic techniques by the majority of politicians as well as political parties with different ideologies. This led to the understanding of populism as a communication technique rather than as an ideology (Walgrave & Jagers, 2007). By bringing forward a debate over narratives, the populist invocation of gender stereotypes also gained momentum.

Gender stereotypes and their effects on candidates: A review

As the main aim of CA is to discredit the image and reputation of the target, by using character traits and exaggerated truth, evoking stereotypes that are linked to the character and behavioral patterns of the target can be an effective strategy. In order to understand the above-mentioned process, first there is a need to discuss gender stereotypes and to review the existing literature researching the effects of gender stereotypes on female politicians.

According to Hamilton and Sherman's definition, stereotypes are shared beliefs about the attributes and behaviors of individuals based on their membership in groups defined by singular characteristic, such as race, gender, or age (Hamilton & Sherman, 1994; Bauer, 2013). Deliberately or not, stereotypes are information shortcuts for most of us. A candidate's beliefs, positions on various issues, and personal traits (including gender) can be used as information shortcuts by voters (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007). Gender stereotypes contain both descriptive and prescriptive elements. Descriptive components come from perceived "characteristics that women do possess, whereas the prescriptive components consist of beliefs about the characteristics women should possess" (Burgess & Borgida, 1995; Bauer, 2013).

Due to prescriptive stereotypes, there are certain behavioral expectations that society has for political candidates. This contradicts the expectations society develops for women based on their gender-belonging. The main qualities expected from political candidates are toughness, aggressiveness, outspokenness and assertiveness. In contrast, communal expectations for women are compassion, warmth, emotional sensitivity, and nurturing nature (Bauer, 2013; Huddy & Capelos, 2002; Jost & Kay, 2005). This contradiction creates the perception that women are unfit for office, less able to fulfil the public's expectations and handle governmental tasks. Due to this reasoning, the majority of female candidates build their campaign strategy around downplaying these stereotypes (Bos, 2011; Gordon, Shafie, & Crigler, 2003). They often adopt a "masculine" campaign style, emphasizing their political experience, decisiveness and toughness (Carreras, 2017). As a sense of the authenticity of candidates is one of the major issues, finding the right behavioral balance becomes challenging. Female candidates thus also risk being framed in counter-stereotypical ways, receiving a negative evaluation as being unfeminine in the eyes of voters, punished for not complying with the intersubjective norms of female behavior.

Stereotypes are products of shared cultural knowledge (Bauer, 2013). The question of how the already existing stereotypes affect society's decision-making process is answered differently by two distinct schools of thought. Some studies of political behavior suggest that gender stereotypes are so deeply rooted that they always affect the evaluation of candidates and they are automatically triggered (Huddy & Capelos, 2002). This assumes that individual voters always rely on already existing gender stereotypes. Contrary to this, social psychologists observe that stereotypes need to be actively triggered, that they are conditional and regulated, and that they depend on context and circumstances (Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998; Devine, 1989). Assuming that gender stereotypes are conditional phenomena, it is necessary to clarify how the activation and application occurs. Bauer explains that "stereotype activation reflects the cognitive accessibility of stereotypes and application reflects whether and how individuals use these stereotypes in judgement" (Bauer, 2013: 29).

Political communication in election campaigns and CA attempts are among the platforms by which repeated exposure to stereotypical cues occurs. Additionally, online microtargeting gives a wider public access for the reasonable price. Rightly identifying the necessary sub-groups of voters that are most likely to rely on stereotypes gives a campaign strategist space for maneuver. According to Kunda and Sinclair, it becomes easier for the individual decision-makers to use stereotypes when a female candidate is behaving in a disagreeable way (Kunda & Sinclair, 1999). Strategically speaking, it becomes possible to analyze big data in a manner to identify what are the agreeable behavioral patterns for specific individual sub-groups and then microtarget them with information that pertains to this. The effectiveness of the application of steretypes is highly dependent on situational circumstances that include, but are not limited to, the nature of specific constituencies (such as age or the level of education of a voter group) or traits of the election system (Kunda & Spencer, 2003).

Bauer suggests that "campaign communication activates stereotypes when they otherwise might not be activated, thereby diminishing support for female candidates", adding that "activation follows exposure to stereotypic information that leads individuals to rely on broader stereotypes" (Bauer, 2015: 693). Stereotype activation and application depends on the type of information voters have about the candidate and additionally on how the information is framed. As a result of her survey experiment and observational analyses, Bauer concluded that increased exposure to stereotypical advertising reduces the odds of support for female candidates, while feminine stereotypes create a boost for

the male candidates. Further, activated stereotypes had negative consequences for female candidates, while in cases when no stereotypic advertisements were used, support for female candidates was higher than for competitor male candidates (Bauer, 2015).

Kunda and Sinclair propose the concept of "desired impression" to further elaborate on the issue of motives (Kunda & Sinclair, 1999). Even when the activation of stereotypes happens spontaneously, their influence over the judgement of an individual about the candidate may be triggered as well as suppressed depending on the individuals' motivation as to how he or she wants to see a candidate (Kunda & Sinclair, 1999). Individuals often engage in the "cherry-picking" of beliefs, in order to validate a desired conclusion.

The importance of motivation becomes even more crucial when it is observed in the spectrum of micro-targeting. Campaigns made a partial retreat from investing in traditional media to reach mass audiences by way of "broadcasting", in favor of tailored and micro-targeted messages, crafted based on data analyses of "needs, wants, expectations, beliefs, preferences, and interests – [that is:] narrowcasting" (Kang, 2005), (Bennett & & Manheim, 2006). Political campaigns have modernized their techniques to better understand voter attitudes and behavior. As a result, it became possible to plan strategies with more accurately tailored messages, targeted accordingly and communicated through the individuals preferred communication medium (Bennett, 2015).

Political campaign strategists developed personalized targeting systems with the purposes of managing the communication process with voters effectively and efficiently. Collecting information about people, such as their behavioral trends and patterns, helps to identify the individual voters who are more likely to be convinced and brought to the voting booths. Especially effective is a combination of data-driven voter research with personalized political micro-targeting. The main idea behind online micro-targeting is to detect areas of interest, issues of concern and ideological preferences, and to manage to deliver individually tailored political information (Turrow, 2013). By adopting appropriate wording reflecting individual needs, the effect of micro-targeting is maximized. Initially, behavioral advertising was used by commercial marketers (such as: tracking users' online behavior and displaying targeted advertisements in response). Online political micro-targeting follows the digital footprints of users, by observing their online behavior, it collects and analyzes the data, and then delivers in a cost-efficient way by spreading mobilizing messages to them (Zuiderveen Borgesius, et al., 2018). Of

course, this does not mean that the use of online micro-targeting will definitely harm female political candidates and their campaigns. Nevertheless, it creates the grounds for political strategists to activate gender stereotypes in voters' minds and to discredit competitors in this way.

Gender-specific stereotypes share certain cross cultural commonalities (Williams & Best, 1990; Hartmann, 2006). Women's rights movements did not progress equally all over the world. Yet it is instructive to observe the strength of stereotypes even in countries that were and are pioneers in the broadening acceptance of women's rights.

For instance, Norway is highly ranked in terms of gender equality, an outcome in which "state feminism" played a role according to Hernes (1987). A Norwegian experiment, conducted by Aalberg and Jenssen, tested whether the gender of politicians affected the way citizens evaluate different character traits of a candidate. One female and one male actor presented the same political speech originally delivered by party leaders to a sample of first-time voters. The evaluation of certain speech traits, such as "knowledgeable, trustworthy, convincing, inspiring, optimistic, hopeful, alarming, worrying, boring, and irrelevant" were then requested from the participants. It turned out that only small and insignificant differences were observed in how women evaluated male and female candidates. However, men rated male candidates significantly higher in most features except for the two negative traits. Additionally, for a male audience, speech was perceived more boring and irrelevant when performed by the female candidate. Due to the male sample responses, male politicians were found to be perceived as more knowledgeable, trustworthy and convincing than female candidates, even though they presented the same speech – verbatim (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007).

Offering a particularly useful conceptual framework, a group of experts at the Centre for Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick coined three terms based on the gender stereotypes affecting the women in politics: "butch," "bitch" and "mummy." The first of these (butch) refers to women with a masculine appearance and/or qualities. The second (bitch) may refer to a woman perceived as spiteful or unpleasant, and the third (mummy) is focused as a critical label on what is perceived to be the "over-nurturing and controlling" nature of a woman. Belonging to one type or another depends on the changing conditions, decisions and behaviors of women (Schnurr & Wharton, 2017).

The cases of Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel

In her book, *What Happened*, former US presidential candidate and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton describes her experience of running for the president of the United States. The chapter, "Being a woman in politics," starts with the words: "In politics, personal narrative is vital", and then goes on to deal with the competition of narratives about her person and her actions as a female candidate (Clinton, 2017: 111). Certain narratives were strategically created about her, certain narratives were more or less implicitly assumed, while some narratives she pushed to be seen in her attempt to avoid being identified as the female candidate. She cites having had to downplay certain achievements, because "bragging is not something women are supposed to do" (Clinton, 2017: 113).

The observations made in this chapter by Clinton confirm the academic findings about the campaigns of female candidates. Clinton describes a lack of authenticity as one of the reasons for her failure; Americans questioned her authenticity and trustworthiness as a candidate (Rodham Clinton, 2017). The former head of communications for Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, Jennifer Palmieri, shares this assessment. In her interview with NPR, she describes a masculine campaign style:

> "We were trying to present (Hillary Clinton) with these qualities that you're used to seeing in a male president: That she's strong enough, that she can handle national security, that she's tough enough that Donald Trump can come after her and try to humiliate her and she's never going to let it show, ... And I think she had to do that. I do think that the first woman nominee had to prove that she could do the job the way a man would, but that robbed her of a lot of her own authenticity" (Palmieri, 2018).

This was so not only during the recent presidential campaign, but already during the 2008 primaries. Clinton partly „blames" her winning the New Hampshire primary on tearing up during one of the interviews, an incident which helped to humanize her in the eyes of the voters. „I – a human – required "humanizing"," she sums up her experience (Clinton, 2017).

To offer another example, German Chancellor Angela Merkel herself could not avoid the subject of gender affecting her political path. As her biographer Evelyn Roll points out:

> "If Angela Merkel is convinced of the inevitability of a process, she moved on unsentimentally. But that is remarked on differently for her than it would be for a

man. And should she seek a compromise, which would be called political talent in a
man, the newspapers call her hesitant. If she gets her own way, she's called the iron
lady whose path is littered with the corpses of her male opponents" (Roll, speaking
in an interview, 2005).

Merkel is to some extent an anomaly in German politics in that she is a scientist from
East Germany and at the same time a divorced and remarried woman with no children.
Qualities that seemed to make her an outsider might have even helped her for a certain
period. she was underestimated and not perceived as a sufficient threat in the eyes of the
male competitors for power. Ferree explains that after the predictable media attention
towards her looks and her personal life, Merkel had to adopt a more fashionable hairstyle
and clothing, not only to display her feminine side, but in order to accommodate West
German trends in this respect. She also had to give interviews to mass-circulated women's
magazines as well as feminist magazines (Ferree, 2006).

Conclusion

Since the 19th century, women's movements have had a major effect on political changes.
They contributed to redefine political interests and alter political networks (Ferree, 2006).
Even if there is a long process to go to achieve a complete degendering of political
processes, much has been done to remake politics into a more gender-inclusive arena of
competition. Gender stereotypes, spontaneously or conditionally activating, are deeply
rooted within society, and up till today affect the decision-making process of voters. The
increased use of online micro-targeting represents one of the contemporary challenges for
female political candidates. The rise of populism and narrative debates further contributes
to this. Currently, women have no other choice than to "run as a woman," i.e.,
emphasising to some extent their gender by conforming to related expectations. Important
victories from the past may pave the way for future female leaders, but these
achievements are not evenly distributed across the world, and in a great part of the world
women still struggle to defend their basic human rights.

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