

The Challenge of Motherhood in the Political Arena

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Today, more and more women are running for office, and the age range of these women is also diversifying over the course of time. Since women at a younger age are starting to run for office and are being elected, this brings up the topic of if they have children or if they will have children during their time in office. Even now in 2020, women are still on the uphill climb of having equal representation in the United States government. No matter how capable she is, it all falls back on if voters can see and trust her capability over a man's. Adding young children to the mix influences even more so what voters think of her capability. How will she take care of the kids? How will she have time to effectively do her job? How will she juggle her career and her family? Described later in this paper, there are many women who demonstrate the higher level of scrutiny mothers face on the campaign trail and how

these women deal with it compared to how little men have to. Men are rarely, if ever, scrutinized of their ability to successfully combine fatherhood with politics (Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2015). Because of this, women have to strategize ways to appear as capable enough for the job through either downplaying their motherhood or embracing it. However, this could reinforce gender stereotypes that undermine a woman's capacity to see herself as a leader and threaten a female candidate's potential to be successful (Deason, Greenlee, & Langner, 2014). So, are women at a disadvantage in the political scene if they have children at home? If women downplay their roles as mothers, they are complacent to the idea that it makes them less fit for office. If women embrace motherhood, they are subject to criticism that they are conforming to traditional gender roles that feminists are constantly trying to erase. Feminist movements have helped mother politicians make progress in proving their worth to America, but there is still a long way to go in regard to changing people's perceptions of women in politics. An analysis of past and present mothers in the political arena suggests that these women are at a disadvantage compared to men, women with no children, and women with adult children due to the public's predetermined opinions of them, institutional misogyny, and mothers' own hesitations even though they are qualified and successful in this field of work.

Society has always assumed that a woman's topmost priority is caring for the house and children. While societal standards are progressively changing as the years go by, this ideal is still rooted in people's minds. This often makes it hard for women to gain political traction when running for office, especially at a federal level. Even further, having young children at home significantly increases the challenges of reforming voters' hesitations of electing her. The expectations of being a mother at home may explain why women run far more often for seats on school boards and city councils, even before

running for state legislative or congressional seats (Dolan, Deckman, & Swers, Ch 4). Another possibility that could cause the hesitation to run for federal office is how it would affect her public perception and personal relationships. Voters may worry about a mother politician's loyalties and question her ability to successfully balance motherhood with politics (Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2015). For male politicians, this concern is not an issue since voters make the assumption that a male candidate, even if a father, has someone else to care for the family (Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2015). This is an example of the gendered assumptions that society has structured to fit gender roles into boxes, and it is exactly why women feel hesitant to run for public office.

Partisanship plays a part in this belief as well. A study done by Pew Center for Social and Demographic Trends showed that Republicans are significantly less likely to support a mother of young children compared to a father of young children (Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2015). Additionally, GOP partisans were 7% more likely to support a woman who has no children than to support a woman who is the mother of two young children ("Revisiting Mommy Wars," 2008). Democrats have the opposite mindset. This Pew Research study showed that Democrats were significantly more likely to vote for a candidate for Congress who is the mother of small children, 33%, than to support an identical candidate who is the father of small children, 24% ("Revisiting Mommy Wars," 2008). Still, there are far more fathers being elected than mothers. In another study, 27% of respondents said that a major reason why there are not more women in top elective offices is that a woman's family responsibilities do not leave time for politics while 40% said this is a minor issue ("Men or Women: Who's the Better Leader?" 2008). However, a number of recent studies have shown that women do about as well as men once they actually run for office, but that many fewer women choose to run in the first place ("Men or Women: Who's the Better Leader?" 2008). So, this provides a possibility that there is not a

higher percentage of women in higher elected offices because they are more willing to believe and succumb to the stereotyped beliefs that women belong at home with her kids rather than in the workplace. Even with these statistics about why women choose not to run, there are many that brave the storm and do it despite the criticism and disbelief in hopes of creating better opportunities for the women who come after them.

Despite this data, women have come a long way in the recent decades. The rising number of mothers with young children in the federal political arena finds its roots in a couple of approaches to feminism. Second Wave Feminism kick-started the goal of getting more women elected into public office. In 1963, Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* criticized the idea that women could find fulfillment only through having children and taking care of their home (Ohio Humanities, 2018). Her book "ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world" (Ohio Humanities, 2018). During this time, women stopped finding their sole identities in their husbands and families and began to break out of the confined box of what defined a woman and to challenge gender roles, including running for office.

Another feminist framework that supports mothers running for office is gender feminism. Gender feminists believe that there are biological differences between men and women, like a woman's moral development, ways of knowing and thinking, and mothering abilities, but these differences are what make women superior (Ford, 2017, 25). Within gender feminism is a subset called maternalism which celebrates the power of a woman's ability to reproduce (Ford, 2017, 25). In 2020, women are embracing what makes them unique and actually using their motherhood to win elections. In her 2010 campaign for the Senate, Blanche Lincoln emphasized and connected her role as a mother to her

competence in office rather than downplaying it (Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2015). She has famously remarked to her Senate colleagues during moments of partisan standoff that “the same values taught to her sons often apply in the U.S. Senate: trust, accountability, and cooperation” (Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2015). This can seem contradictory to what people think when they hear the word “feminist.” Gender feminists find power in the differences between men and women, while traditional feminists argue that not all women aspire to be mothers or want to be seen just for their differences from men. Nonetheless, gender feminists promote all aspects of being a woman and how it makes them superior to men, especially when it comes to working collaboratively with others and crafting legislation. There are many that do not agree with gender feminism, including men and traditional feminists, that negatively influence the public perception of mothers running for office. Even so, women now more than ever are able to embrace their motherhood while also running for elite offices because of the women, and gender feminists, that have come before them.

In 1973 during the Second Wave Feminism movement, Congresswomen Yvonne Brathwaite Burke made history when she announced that she was pregnant (Haberhorn, 2018). At 41 years old, she was going to become the first congresswoman to ever give birth while serving her term in office (Haberhorn, 2018). During this time, she recalled a colleague telling her that she was sent to Washington “to work, not to have a baby” (Haberhorn, 2018). Men have never been objectified by these standards. A woman’s purpose is not solely to reproduce, and women are constantly proving it. Much more recently in 2018, Tammy Duckworth was the first woman in the Senate to give birth while in office, and one of just ten to give birth while serving in Congress (Wamsley, 2018). Of these ten, five are still in office (Haberhorn, 2018). Only ten women in the history of our country have

given birth while in Congress. This is a strikingly low number for a country which was founded on the basis of freedom and opportunities.

While there is such a small number of women who have given birth while in office, there are many more women with children still at home that have been elected and are still in Congress. By 1998, more than 20 percent of female members came to Congress with minor-aged children (Oral History, 2020). Two trends are accountable for this: more women are putting off motherhood until they are older, and more young women are running for office and are being elected (Haberkorn, 2018). Some women even run for office just to defy the gender constraints that are placed over them. In 1992, Patty Murray was told that she was “just a mom in tennis shoes,” but not too long after, she won a Senate seat and became the first female senator with school-aged children at home (Haberkorn, 2018). In January of 2019, Florida Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz created the “Moms in the House” caucus where she invited the 25 mothers of school-aged children in the House to come together and socialize (Gibson, 2019). When asked about this Caucus, Representative Angie Craig said, “It’s great for young girls that they see this representation... but maybe it’s even more important that my four sons grow up in a world where women are fully representing them. This is the new normal for them, that women are at the policymaking table” (Gibson, 2019). One way that mothers in Congress will gain more representation is when both the male and female public perception accepts that this is indeed the new normal. Out of the 435 seats in the House, only 87 are held by women, and just 25 of those are mothers of school-aged children (“Women in the U.S. House 2018,” 2018). To put this into perspective, only 20% of the House of Representatives are women, and just 29% of these women are mothers with children living at home. This is a vast under representation of America’s population.

As the number of mothers with young children has increased, it has very quickly exposed the gendered assumptions within Congress that make it difficult for mothers to successfully work once they have been elected. It was not until 2011 that there was a women's restroom off of the house floor, and women could not even show their shoulders in the House Speaker's Lobby until 2017 (Gibson, 2019). In 2007, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi established the first two dedicated lactation rooms in the Capitol, and, nearly a decade later, Senator Duckworth persuaded the Senate to allow infants on the floor until they are one year old (Haberkorn, 2018). As of right now, the practice of using campaign money for campaign-related child care expenses is a states' issue and is decided case by case, but in 2019, Representative Katie Porter introduced the "Help America Run Act" which would put this practice into federal law ("State Candidates," 2020). History is happening right before our eyes as Congresswomen work to break the gendered barriers surrounding the work field in politics, but it sometimes seems as if they are on the front lines of this battle alone. It is going to take the progress of more women, and moms, being elected into Congress to get more gender-fair and family-fair laws and regulations put into place, even within the walls of the capitol.

Mothers are at a disadvantage when running for office compared to men because while all issues are women issues, mothers in Congress do support family-based legislation more than other members, and this makes voters concerned that this is the mothers' sole priority. In a study done on this topic by Lisa Bryant and Julia Hellwege, their results suggest that being a mother may play a role in shaping legislative agenda because working mothers consistently produce the most bills related to children and families, and women with children below the age of 18 years at home sponsored more legislation than women who had adult children and women without children (Bryant & Hellwege, 2018, 463). This makes sense because these mothers face family issues

every day while serving in Congress and have the power to make a change. Without these mothers in Congress, America would rarely see successful passing of family-related legislation or just how disproportionately childcare concerns are put onto mothers compared to fathers, but this can lead the public to believe that these issues are the only issues that women are concerned with. Having these mothers in Congress exposing these injustices “highlights the need to figure out a way to be able to balance [their] home life and [their] profession, but the downside is that it’s reinforcing this idea that this is a problem only women face” (Gibson, 2019). The solution to this is going to rely on a reshaping of society’s standards rather than legislation, and only time will resolve this.

One way that women are trying to change the public’s opinions about them is by proving them wrong. Blanche Lincoln was in her second term of serving in the House when she became the fourth woman in Congress to have a baby as her twin sons were born in 1996 (Haberkorn, 2018). At first, she decided to continue working into her third term; However, when she learned that she was pregnant with twins and the associated risks with campaigning during the summer, she decided not to run for her third consecutive term (Haberkorn, 2018). Her break from Congress could be used against women as evidence that women cannot both successfully work and raise their children. It could also discourage other mothers from running for elections if they have infants at home as well. But two years later in 1998, Lincoln started her first campaign for the Senate and centered her campaign strategies on assuring that her kids would be well taken care of by her husband if she were elected (Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2015). When it came to electing Lincoln for the Senate, voters were initially divided. Older women voters were concerned that she could not successfully juggle her responsibilities and consistently asked Lincoln to explain herself as a mother and to even provide the details of her child-care arrangements

(Henneberger, 1998). Yet, voters who were young mothers themselves easily identified with Lincoln and praised her for taking a couple years off and wanting to jump back into the workfield of Congress (Henneberger, 1998). Once she had addressed her plans for childcare if she were to be elected, the once hesitant voters began to support her (Henneberger, 1998). Men are almost never asked how they plan to care for their children if they are elected, and it is unjust of voters to pressure mothers into relinquishing this information just to get their votes. This is evidence of how women are held to a higher, unfair standard when campaigning in comparison to their male counterparts. Women are expected to explain themselves and defend their capabilities due to their gender whereas men are not.

Over a decade later in 2010, Lincoln completely shifted her strategy. Instead of downplaying her role as mother, she emphasized and connected it to her competence in office (Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2015). This shift in focus could be evidence of the growing acceptance of young mothers in Congress, from Lincoln's confidence in her incumbency, or due to the fact that her children were 12 years older by this point and "a mother of teenagers could be less worrisome to voters than a mother of toddlers" (Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2015). Regardless, she is a symbol that women can do it all: she sat in the House for two terms, took a two year break after having twins, was elected for a seat in the Senate, and all the while promoted being a working mother with young children at home. Among many others, she is a true testimony that the only things that hold mothers back are the fixed assumptions and beliefs from voters and the public rather than the mothers' actual abilities.

There are clear reasons why women being defined by the public's predetermined opinions of them is a problem. This puts women at unfair disadvantages compared to men when campaigning and running in elections. Women are persistently being interrogated about anything

except their actual policies: their plans on how they intend to still care for their children, how their partners feel about their decision to run, if they are strong enough to compete with men, and so forth. A big factor of a woman's electability is how capable voters think she is instead of her platform and her ideas for change. Men are never scrutinized like this. Even when mothers with children still at home are elected, there are so many flaws within the system that show the gendered bias towards men. There was not a women's restroom off of the House floor in the United States capitol until nine years ago. Women do not have to breastfeed in private, but if they wanted to, there were no private places to do that in the capitol until 2007. Women are constantly told that their priority is to care for their children, yet there is no support from the government. It is slowly becoming more acceptable for women to use campaign funds to pay for childcare expenses while they are on the campaign trail. The United States government and population have many faults when it comes to the equal representation of women in all spheres: single, married, childless, young, old. The solution to resolving this issue within the country is the continued support of all types of women in the political arena and the cessation of questions to women that are about their age, their children, and their husbands and the start of the same questions asked of male counterparts.

There are very few academic, scholarly, published journals and studies done on the topic of mothers with young children running for office and in office. This leaves a large knowledge gap that needs to be closed if there is to be any progress on breaking the double-bind women face in the political arena. America says that women are equally as capable as men, if not more, in the political arena, yet there is still an immense under representation of women, especially mothers, in Congress. Most published work on this issue are interviews with mothers through news outlets. There is very little academic research into this topic which also says something about the public opinion of

the importance of mothers working in elected positions in the government. While these trends in this paper were definitely worth analyzing, it is merely not enough, and women deserve more recognition and acknowledgement of their accomplishments, struggles, and the paths they carve to get to where they are. There can be no solution to this issue without informing the public of this scrutinization women face every day and reshaping how Americans view women in public office.

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