

Leading Men: Presidential Campaigns and the Politics of Manhood

Katz, Jackson

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The 2012 primaries and presidential election, and the subsequent standoffs between Republicans and Democrats in the US Congress, have offered plenty of examples of US politicians exhibiting the worst characteristics of stereotypically macho behavior: blustering, violent rhetoric, radical oversimplification of complex issues, and refusal to negotiate or compromise on even the smallest point, lest one be thought unmanly.

Katz, an expert on gender-related violence prevention and critical media literacy, does not dwell upon the gridlock of the current congress, although his argument may apply to many of its members. The author's concern is with presidential elections and the way that perceptions of masculinity affect the outcomes of those elections. They have become, Katz argues, almost purely referenda on the candidates' "manhood," as defined by political spin and media campaigns.

Katz analyzes six of the eleven presidential contests since 1972. For each election, he shows that promoting a candidate's traditional masculine image, including the willingness to "fight," both metaphorically and literally, while deriding opponents for lacking such qualities, has been a political strategy systematically employed, most obviously and successfully by conservatives, to sway voters through a simplistic emotional appeal that avoids complex discussions of public policy and substitutes the more easily manipulated question of "who is the better man?" Thus, the inevitable photo-ops in which candidates who have rarely handled anything more deadly than a fountain pen pose for the camera brandishing hunting rifles, or on the deck of an aircraft carrier. Thus, also, the predictable attacks on opponents' masculine image, such as the Swiftboat slanders against John Kerry's military service and right-wing radio hosts' use of childish or vulgarly feminized nicknames to mock liberal officeholders.

To some degree Katz's point is obvious. Masculinity has traditionally been associated with power, and the presidency represents great political power; therefore, displaying traditional masculine qualities is an obvious emotional ploy to persuade voters of one's fitness for such a role. Politicians behaving like belligerent macho-men is nothing new. Andrew Jackson won the presidency after killing a man in a pistol duel, and US congressman Preston Brooks literally clubbed a political opponent to the floor during the abolition of slavery controversy of the 1850s.

But, as Katz points out, political dynamics have changed since 1972, as the historic pattern of white male dominance has been altered by the political rise of women and racial minorities. This has strengthened the link in the short term, as traditional-minded voters wary of change have sought presidents who reaffirm how they think a president *should* look and act. But, with society changing, will traditional, white, heterosexual masculinity remain the chief characteristic by which voters judge presidential candidates?

It remains to be seen whether the election and re-election of Barack Obama, the first nonwhite president and one who presents a cooler, more cerebral style of manhood than many of his predecessors, signals a long-term change in the pattern.

BRADLEY A. SCOTT (Spring 2013)

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