

WOMEN

10 CHAPTER

BOTH CANDIDATES FOR PRESIDENT IN 2016 MADE WOMEN'S ISSUES A CENTRAL CONCERN FOR MANY VOTERS. HILLARY CLINTON CELEBRATED THE HISTORIC NATURE OF HER CANDIDACY AND WIDELY EXPECTED TRIUMPH WHILE EXTOLLING THE VALUE OF HAVING A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE ASCENDANT IN THE WHITE HOUSE. ON THE OTHER HAND, DONALD TRUMP'S BEHAVIOR, IN THE PAST AND ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL, BROUGHT HOME TO MANY HOW ENTRENCHED CERTAIN RETROGRADE ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN STILL ARE IN THE UNITED STATES.

With its first major-party female candidate, the 2016 presidential election campaign was a watershed. Based on Hillary Clinton's consistent lead in the polls, most people believed it would culminate in the election of America's first woman president. Instead, for many it was a wake-up call about progress not yet made and attitudes not yet changed.

"I'd say before the election, the average woman felt like things were pretty good and [there was] that 'We don't really need feminism anymore' kind of feeling," says Jhana Bach, an organizer for Seattle, Washington's National Organization for Women (NOW) chapter. "Seattle likes to think of itself as a bastion of liberal thinking. But the reality of the election sort of proved that wrong." Although the majority of Seattle's voters supported Clinton, Bach and many other Washingtonians were surprised by support that Donald Trump was able to win, especially in the suburbs.

Almost a century after women won the right to vote and decades after the women's rights protests of the 1960s and 1970s, feminism again became a topic of intense national debate during the election.

In her concession speech after losing her bid for the

Democratic nomination in 2008, Clinton vowed that the country would "someday launch a woman into the White House" and referred to the votes she had won as "18 million cracks" in the "highest, hardest glass ceiling."¹ Eight years later, at the Democratic National Convention in 2016, the audience watched a montage of the nation's first 44 presidents – all men – in black and white, before the video gave way to a beaming Hillary Clinton in vivid color, live via satellite. "I can't believe we just put the biggest crack in that glass ceiling yet," she declared.²

Arguably, Clinton's gender played an important role in the election, and Clinton and others say she endured sexist attacks from both the media and her opponent. Political pundits and journalists called her "shrill," and suggested that she smile more.³ Trump called her a "such a nasty woman" in one debate and said, "I just don't think she has a presidential look. And you need a presidential look. You have to get the job done."⁴

But even as Trump was implicitly linking Clinton's gender to an alleged lack of ability, he accused her of using her gender to score political points. "Well, I think the only card she has is the woman's card," he said in April 2016.⁵ "If Hillary Clinton were a man, I don't think



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————— *Jhana Bach*

she’d get 5 percent of the vote. The only thing she’s got going is the women’s vote. And the beautiful thing is that women don’t like her.”⁶

In a nationwide 2015 Gallup poll, 92 percent of respondents said they would vote for a well-qualified female candidate or a well-qualified African-American candidate.⁷ But resistance to Clinton sometimes came from an unexpected quarter: young women who resented what they perceived as pressure to vote for Clinton because she was a woman. Sensitive to this, Clinton’s campaign tried to be inspirational and historic all the while not making too much of gender.

“Clearly, I’m not asking people to vote for me simply

because I’m a woman,” Clinton told a gathering in July 2015. “I’m asking people to vote for me on the merits. And I think one of the merits is I am a woman and I can bring those views and perspectives to the White House.”⁸

But that pitch was not enough to win over many women. Although 54 percent of women voters went for Clinton, Trump won 52 percent of white women’s votes, compared to Clinton’s 43 percent.⁹

SEXIST REMARKS

Many Americans saw the election results as a setback for women’s rights and progress, not only because a female candidate lost, but also because they saw Trump as a misogynist.

During the campaign, Trump made a series of demeaning remarks about women, often about their appearance. His targets went beyond Clinton to include Carly Fiorina, one of his competitors for the Republican nomination, female journalists and others. Most explosive was a 2005 recording in which Trump used vulgarities to describe grabbing women against their consent. When the so-called Access Hollywood tape surfaced a month before Election Day, political pundits and many others considered it a death knell for Trump’s campaign.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- » 54 percent of women voted for Hillary Clinton
- » Women make up 47 percent of the work force
- » Women make up 20.1 percent of the U.S. Congress
- » Women earn 81.5 percent as much as men do for the same work



▲ Polly Baca, Denver, Colorado

“It’s hard for me to even say [Trump’s] name,” says Polly Baca, an active Democrat and retired member of the Colorado state senate. “That’s how much it hurt me. First as a Mexican-American, and then as a woman. What he said about us, it’s very painful.”

Trump’s victory set off a backlash in defense of women’s issues and equality. Baca says it was important to her to go to Washington, D.C., and be among the hundreds of thousands who marched there to protest Trump’s presidency in January 2017.



▲ Pastor Garry Brantley, Birmingham, Alabama

Pastor Garry Brantley of Birmingham, Alabama’s Cross-bridge Church is also dismayed by Trump’s rhetoric. “I think some of the misogynist statements that Trump made is just ... indefensible. ... It would be hard to find someone who’s authentically trying to follow this Jesus to say, ‘OK, women, they’re just sex objects. You can objectify them and all that.’”

For some Americans, the future president’s comments were a clear sign that gender equality was not as close at hand as they had thought.

WORKPLACE EQUALITY

One focus of this rejuvenated national discussion on sexism is women’s role in the workplace. “Women are such a big part of the population and yet it seems like ... we don’t count for much. ... How much does a woman earn in respect to a man? ... Is it 75 to 80 percent?” Martha Thompson, of El Paso, Texas, says. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that women make 81.5 percent of what their male peers do for the same work.¹⁰



▲ Martha Thompson, El Paso, Texas

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That is not to say that progress has not been made. For instance, women are better educated than they were a generation ago: In 2012, 88 percent achieved a high school degree or higher, compared with 47.5 percent in 1963.¹¹ Also, women now make up 47 percent of the work force¹² and have a work force participation rate of 58 percent, up from 38 percent in 1963.¹³ They are even breaking into male-dominated fields. “Our female apprenticeship numbers are [up to] 11 percent. May not sound like much, but that’s the highest in the industry,” says Dale Bright of the Local 242 construction union in Seattle. He says there were virtually no women in the industry just a few decades ago.



“Our youngest came to us by way of adoption. Her birth mother chose life.”

———— Pam Andrews

Equal pay is not the only challenge women face in the workplace. Ken Isaksson, who works at a fish hatchery in Aberdeen, Washington, says, “Sexual discrimination and sexual harassment [are] alive and well and it’s never going away. And it’s a sad state in this country, but it’s probably as prevalent as racism.” About one in four women in the United States experiences harassment in the workplace.¹⁴ Although Isaksson’s team at the hatchery is all men, they have had female interns. He says he works hard to make sure they feel comfortable in the male-dominated industry, but many employers do not do the same.

Beyond harassment, women, particularly working mothers, still struggle to balance their work and home lives. The United States is the only one of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s 41 members – developed countries in Europe, North America, Asia and Oceania – without a paid family leave policy, meaning that many women must return to work almost immediately after giving birth.¹⁵ The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 requires employers to offer up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to deal with family- and health-related issues, but the law does not apply to private companies with fewer than 50 employees or employees who work fewer than 1,250 hours – about half-time – per year.¹⁶ Vanessa S. of El Paso, Texas, lives in a homeless

shelter with her sons. She says the biggest challenge is, “maintaining a job and being able to spend time with your children. Equaling it out.”

ABORTION

Few debates related to women’s issues are as sensitive as that over abortion. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recorded 664,435 legal induced abortions in 2013, about 12.5 abortions per 1,000 women between the ages of 15 and 44.¹⁷ For comparison, Germany had approximately 5.7 abortions per 1,000 women in the same year.¹⁸

Although abortion was made legal in the United States by the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, some state, local and even national lawmakers continue to make access to the procedure more difficult.

In 2013, Texas legislation established requirements about the width of hallways in clinics that performed abortions, the distance clinics could be from the nearest hospital and even the type of air conditioning required. These new rules caused 22 of the state’s 41 clinics to close,¹⁹ in a state with about 14 million women.²⁰ The legislation was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2016, but the state government is working on new rules to restrict abortion.



 Pam Andrews, Delaware

At the national level, Republican lawmakers have also worked to end government funding of Planned Parenthood, an independent network of more than 650 centers across the country that provides reproductive health-care services, including abortions.

In the United States, the debate on abortion is split into two camps. Those who oppose abortion, and describe themselves as “pro-life” make up about 40 percent of the population.²¹ Those who support access to abortion and describe themselves as “pro-choice,” make up 57 percent of the population.

Slightly more women than men – 59 percent to 55 percent – say abortion should be legal in all or most cases. In general, younger people are more supportive of access to abortion: 65 percent of Americans 18 to 29 years old say it should be legal in all or most cases, compared with 53 percent of those 65 or older.²² Although Democrats tend to support access to legal abortion, the debate does not fall neatly along party lines: 34 percent of Republicans and 75 percent of Democrats believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases.²³

Pam Andrews travels to Washington, D.C., from her home in Delaware every year for the March for Life, an annual pro-life rally in the nation’s capital. “Some people are pro-abortion and they’ll cloak it in women’s health and women’s choice,” Andrews says. But she says she is concerned about the rights of unborn babies, and the debate is personal for her and her family. “Our youngest came to us by way of adoption. Her birth mother chose life,” she explains.

Blanca Gallego, a small-business owner in Pecos, Texas, has similar views. “I vote pro-life. I believe that

nobody has a right to take somebody else’s life,” she says. “Even if you feel [that the fetus is] growing inside of you and that you can decide on your body. It’s not your right.”

For many pro-life Americans, including Andrews and Gallego, abortion is often a deeply religious issue. The staunchest pro-life religious group is white evangelical Protestants, with only 29 percent believing that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, compared with 70 percent who believe it should be illegal.²⁴ In the United States, evangelical Christians differ from mainline Protestants in their belief in the “born again” experience, a moment of complete belief in God and spiritual rebirth, about which they feel called to spread the word, or “evangelize.” In the United States, evangelicals tend to be more conservative and live primarily in the Southeast. In contrast to evangelicals, 67 percent of white mainline Protestants believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases, as do 55 percent of black Protestants and 53 percent of Catholics.²⁵

“[What] if a pro-choice candidate’s policies actually would address some of the poverty that often is reflected in abortion and therefore overall reduce the number of abortions? Which one is the Christian thing to do?”

————— Pastor Garry Brantley

Brantley, the Birmingham, Alabama, pastor, says, “[I]t’s very important for the unborn rights to be protected,” but he says he appreciates the complexity of the abortion debate.

“What about rape? What about incest? What about in those situations where there could not be the human flourishing?” he asks. Brantley says politicians and citizens alike must work to address the causes of abortion. On that score, he says he does not believe pro-life politicians have all the answers. “If a pro-choice candidate’s policies actually would address some of the poverty that often is reflected in abortion and therefore overall reduce the number of abortions? ... Which one is the Christian thing to do?”

But for those who support keeping abortion legal, the rights of the woman carrying the fetus are fundamental.

“I think whatever our religion is ... a woman has the right to determine what happens to her body,” Martha Thompson, of El Paso, says. “It’s the men that are making the decisions about what happens to a woman’s body when she is the one that’s going to have to bear whatever the effects are of having a child.” Women are underrepresented in Washington and in politics more broadly. They make up just 20.1 percent of Congress²⁶ and hold only 24 percent of statewide elective executive offices.²⁷



 Jill Wildenberg, Denver, Colorado

“It’s older white Christian men, ... that’s who’s promoting this [anti-abortion] legislation,” says Jill Wildenberg, public policy director for the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado, a coalition of religious progressives in Denver. Wildenberg, who is Jewish, has testified against state legislators’ efforts to limit access to abortion. “[M]y religious beliefs are not in line with that,” she says she told lawmakers. “Life does not begin at conception according to my religious teachings. ... Who are you to tell me what your religious beliefs are?”

A FINAL WORD

In their own ways, both candidates for president in 2016 made women’s issues a central concern for many voters. Hillary Clinton celebrated the historic nature of her candidacy and widely expected triumph while extolling the value of having a woman’s perspective ascendant in the White House. On the other hand, Donald Trump’s behavior, in the past and on the campaign trail, brought home to many how entrenched certain retrograde attitudes toward women still are in the United States.

If Trump’s presidency has created a new sense of urgency about women’s issues, it has also created an explosion of new leadership roles for women in the so-called “resistance,” who organize, call their members of Congress and march in greater numbers than men.²⁸ In January 2017, Emily’s List, a political action committee founded in 1985 to support pro-choice, Democratic women running for office, announced that it had broken its own fundraising record in the 2016 election cycle.²⁹

The question, of course, is whether this momentum will last throughout and beyond Trump’s presidency and what role it could play in the 2018 congressional elections and the 2020 presidential campaign. If women stay engaged at the current level, and if Trump does nothing to change many women’s minds about him – his approval rating among women sits at 31 percent at this writing³⁰ – then the next few election cycles could see a renaissance for candidates who embrace such issues as pay equity for equal work, paid family leave and access to abortion, in addition to a host of other progressive priorities. If so, that will be a sea change from the conservative sweep of last year.

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