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# How to Escape 130 Years of Being Unnatural, Incompetent, and Unviable: American Women Presidential Candidates Take to Social Media

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How to Escape 130 Years of Being Unnatural, Incompetent, and Unviable: American Women  
Presidential Candidates Take to Social Media

by

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After Hillary Clinton lost the United States presidential election in 2016, many liberal Americans walked away wondering what went wrong. Was Hillary Clinton unelectable, after all? And what made her that way? There is some truth to the question of Clinton's electability, though not based on Clinton's merit or qualifications. She was, at face value, the better candidate. More experienced, more polished, more endorsed. However, Americans found her voice "shrill", her laugh "witchlike", her marriage crumbling, and her personality cold (Sullivan, 2019). Many of these notions sprouted from media portrayals and analysis of her uniquely female issues, often referred to as the "H3 problem" (hair, hemline, and husband) (Shoaf and Parsons, 2018, p. 2). When she attempted to shake the stereotypes placed upon her by news outlets, press events, and her competitor, she took to Twitter. Notably, she used traditionally masculine and cooperative language in each of her tweets. The combination of masculine with cooperative indicates that Clinton wished to be perceived as "assertive, competent, and direct" (McDonnell, 2020, p. 80). While the nation ultimately found her "cold" and "inauthentic", it raises an interesting question around the role of social media for women in politics.

Despite research showing that American public attitudes about women have changed dramatically over the 130 years they have occupied political spaces, media press portrayals of women have not (Horowitz et al., 2018). Falk (2012) finds that press coverage of women, particularly women running for president, is no better than it was in 1873 during Victoria Claflin Woodhull's historic run as the first-ever woman on the ballot. As Falk explores the various treatments of women in presidential races over time, she carves out three main arguments about women's ability to govern recycled by the media: unnatural, incompetent, and unviable. They are used at the will of the media to create narratives about women that ultimately lead to their failure on voting day because of the lasting impressions they create on American voters. When Falk

asks why media coverage failed to make progress over 130 years, she provides no answer and instead warns of long-term implications. Falk predicts an impending lack of representation in government because current media coverage of women may discourage future women from running.

The path to equal and fair elections is social media. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook offer a tool for women candidates to change the power dynamic. There is no middleman between them and the public, no reporter asking gendered questions rather than policy ones, no hot button headline about an outfit or a leading expert weighing on their temperament. It is, finally, the opportunity to carve their own narrative and engage with the public on their terms. Perhaps, most importantly, social media allows other women, public servants and civilians alike, to find their political voices and take ownership of policy elections (Keller, 2019). U.S congressional Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's approach to Twitter illustrates exactly these strengths of social media and acts as an example of what social media is capable of for women in politics. In an answer to Falk's argument that media's unnatural, incompetent, and unviable cycle pushes women away from politics, this work argues social media pulls them back and provides an escape from media frames, partly by using Ocasio-Cortez as an example. To arrive at this conclusion, this thesis will first explore the historical underpinnings of the origin of differences between men and women on the political stage and then juxtapose an 1890's *Atlantic* article against modern examples of Falk's unnatural, incompetent, and unviable trifecta to show its prevalence and evolution over time that ultimately leads into the intervention and innovation of social media as a powerful, liberating tool in women's political pocket.

## **Historical Analysis of the Men and Women Power Dynamic**

Within the discourse around the power imbalance between men and women, there is a variety of fields, subjects, and theories that both exist and intersect. If one were to look, there exists, almost certainly, research written on any given topic and gender inequality, from astrophysics to zoology. Politics and elections attract a larger share of attention, but they all share one core belief: men have more power than women. It is helpful to begin with an exploration on where this belief comes from, how it has permeated almost every corner of modern life, and how it manifests in the American political social communication system. To do this exploration, authors Sebastian Kraemer and Gerda Lerner offer critical deconstructions of society's concepts of gender hierarchy.

In "The Origins of Fatherhood: An Ancient Family Process", Sebastian Kraemer dissects the role of men in society over time (1991). At the core of his argument, Kraemer believes that men do not have an inherent role in the development of humanity outside of their ability to procreate. The concept of "fatherhood" isn't given, humans did not begin walking on this earth with defined parental roles. Kraemer exemplifies this with animal behavior in the wild. Particularly, our close relatives, the chimpanzee. Male chimps have no role in raising young chimps, it is only the mother and the children in their family unit. This is now one of the big distinctions between human and chimp development, thus indicating that humans diverged from chimps at some point, caused by something, to develop into our patriarchal society today.

Women, conversely, are essential to the forwarding of the population. Their role is inherent, their power among humans inherent. Other authors echo the same notion - Lerner, in "The Creation of the Patriarchy", writes "We assume[d] the existence of male dominance as a given and considered any evidence to the contrary merely an exception" (Lerner, 1986, p. 16).

This sounds familiar to our modern ideas of women politicians as exceptions and novelties. Instead, feminist anthropologists found that in many early societies different sexes are considered “complementary” (p. 18) and equal in being essential to the larger survival of the group. They are acknowledged as different, with different roles suited to their biological sex, but “complementary” in their functions. It is the constructed concept of gender that then creates power imbalance (Lerner, 1986).

There are two schools of thought that directly contradict Lerner’s argument that women and men are equal without the layers of gender that society has built. They both contribute heavily to the lasting perceived gender imbalances in the world today. One is “the scientific” discourse that relies on “man the hunter” (Kraemer, 1991, pg. 2) in which early versions of society are fueled by men who hunt big game. There is now evidence that early societies more likely relied primarily on small game and gathering; however, this narrative prevails in school education and dominates much of our modern understanding of gender roles. Man, the provider, and woman, the caregiver. The other dominant view is the “traditional defense” (Kramer, 1991, p. 2), the basic argument being that women are subordinate to men as ordained by God. By divine design, women are meant for different tasks and if God has made sexual differences, then there is no choice but to fulfill those roles. This argument continues to prevail today largely because it is based in religious beliefs that continue to circulate and maintain popularity today.

The question remains: Where does this deep-rooted belief in male superiority begin? What gave these lasting ideas, like the traditional defense, roots? Kraemer traces it to the building blocks of our modern economy. It’s less sinister than either theory makes it out to be. As society transitioned from hunter gathered to organized agrarian, men and women further separated their roles based upon their physical attributes. Men, as stronger individuals, were able

to haul and build farming instruments and domesticate animals while women remained primarily as child readers and gatherers. Thus, by building early settlements, men began to own property and trade resources like livestock and materials. Men became dominant because the economy began to build around the assets they possessed and therefore, they gained power by owning the things that quickly became valuable in growing societies. By owning the valuable things, men become wealthier as monetary systems are introduced and then become leaders in society - arriving at modern day, where women are just beginning to gain traction as political leaders.

As we move forward in time, building upon the roots of gender inequality laid out in the previous section, the pillars of public discourse around women politicians take shape. Here, the focus pivots to the American presidential race and mass media communication strategies about women and their presidential bids.

In lower-level races, such as mayoral or city council, women win just as much as men do (Falk, 2012). However, wins at the lower level are often influenced by interpersonal connections. Presidential campaigns are the opposite and are almost entirely documented and broadcasted through the media's lens. The media and the press are in control of “framing, shaping, ignoring, or presenting” a candidate to the world's eyes and ears (Falk, 2012, p. 1672).

The media, ultimately, is responsible for who is likely to win — and frighteningly, who even decides to run — by using three core arguments to talk about women: unnatural, incompetent, and unviable (Falk, 2012). Unnatural, in that women, by nature, are not meant to be in political office. Incompetent, implying women are not smart enough for political office. Unviable, arguing that America is not ready to elect a female or females are “unelectable”.

The three arguments, referred to as a “trifecta” throughout this work, are coined by Erika Falk in her 2012 assessment of women in media over time, “Unnatural, Incompetent, Unviable:

Press Portrayals of Women Candidates for President”. Through her research, she identified the three terms as major categories press coverage about women fall into.

To show the trifecta’s appearance over time, from early print media to televised mass media to today’s opinion television shows, William Clark’s “Woman Suffrage, Pro and Con” offers an 1890 take on the three arguments to juxtapose against modern examples that illuminate the argument’s prevalence over time. One hundred and fifty years after the first female presidential candidate ran, news coverage continues to cycle the trifecta.

## **Unnatural**

In 1872, Victoria Claflin Woodhull claimed the title of the first female on the presidential ballot. At this time, she could not vote for herself, as the 19th Amendment allowing women to vote did not pass until 1920. However, the press began writing about women and politics extensively in this time period. The year of her run, the New York Herald published an editorial about her race, stating that “There seems to him to be a something which is unnatural in permitting her to share for the glory of governing” (Falk, 2012, p. 1679).

Early “unnatural” critiques of women are common in the 19th and early 20th century and fall into the classic “traditional defense”, where God’s intended design is the key to keeping women from power. There are elements of “man the hunter” too, where women are biologically and culturally unsuited to politics. In an 1890 *Atlantic* article titled “Woman Suffrage: Pro and Con”, Charles Worcester Clark exemplifies this as he writes of women’s inability to govern and vote because of their preoccupation with their domestic duties. In 7000 words, Clark fits in all three of the core arguments. He begins, of course, where many anti-women's-rights arguments often fall into: women are unnatural in political environments. However, Clark puts his own spin



on it, arguing that society has developed in a way that women are now taking on men's roles. Therefore, society created an unnatural environment where women are now asking for "women's rights" that they do not truly desire (Clark, March 1890):

The material progress of the century has been too rapid for the social development to keep pace with it; and nowhere is the change ... This changed condition of women must, however, be recognized as a fact, and the suffrage movement is its consequence. With many women doing a man's work ... the demand for woman suffrage is thus largely the result of an unnatural, and it is to be hoped temporary, state of human society, so it may well be questioned whether the desired boon would prove a palliative, or only an aggravation, of the evil which has produced it. (Clark, March 1890, para. 4)

Clark believes society evolved unnaturally, forcing women into men's roles, therefore women are unnatural in places of power and in men's work. The same line of argument emerges over one hundred years later in Elizabeth Dole's 2000 presidential race. A 1999 *New York Times* article by Richard Berke explores Dole's candidacy and validity as a candidate. Berke dedicates the first half to her strengths and makes note that Dole didn't "fumble one word" during her 25-minute presidential exploration speech without notes. However, the article quickly begins picking at things unrelated to the content matter of the speech. For one, Berke declares Dole "decidedly unspontaneous" and separates her from her competition by pointing out her "different style". Both of these comments feel out of place among the policy discussion that fills Berke's analysis – until his closing comments, where Berke concludes his article with a quote from an

“active Republican”. “But the qualities that make her appealing,” Berke writes after mentioning her “different style”, “could turn off others”. The comment leads into his final quote:

"I think she's a fine woman," Wayne Lilly, an active Republican from Chilton, N.H., said after a recent Christian Coalition event in his state. "But I don't believe a woman ought to be in that particular place of leadership. She would be a good helpmate. But the Bible teaches us that a woman should not have authority over men. It's nothing but foolishness." (Berke, March 1999).

It's unclear if Berke means to imply himself that women are not meant to be president, but by ending his analysis with the claim that the Bible places men in power, and therefore a woman in power is unnatural, he frames readers going forward. The “helpmate” line echoes Clark’s belief in women’s unnaturalness outside of the home. As evidenced by the authors above, separated by 109 years, the unnatural perception of women as president continues because journalists and media continue to frame women as such.

### **Incompetent**

The “unnatural” argument is one facet of media discourse on women presidential candidates, and it is frequently the way that women are talked *about* by the media. There is also the way the women are talked *to* by the media - the questions they are asked, the compliments they are given. Television media often engage in stereotyped language when speaking to women political candidates, named the “H3 problem”. That is: being asked about “hair, husband, and hemline” (Shoaf and Parsons, 2016, p. 2). This type of questioning can complicate a female

candidate's qualifications as a leader, as it overshadows opportunities to demonstrate policy-making and critical thinking. It also reduces women candidate's platform to "women's issues", thus rendering women "incompetent".

There is evidence for women candidates who play into gender stereotypes finding more success among voters than women do not (Hernnson et al., 2003). This strategy is called "gender issue ownership", one that Sarah Palin is known for (Hernnson et al., 2003, p. 246). In the 2008 presidential election, Palin received seven times as many H3 mentions as her vice-presidential opponent, Joe Biden. Palin also clocked twice as many direct references to her gender than Hillary Clinton over the course of the 2008 election cycle, though Clinton ran for the Democratic presidential nomination and Palin was Republic nominee John McCain's vice-president pick (2016). Receiving twice as many mentions, then, may have been the result of Palin appearing in the news cycle longer than Clinton because Clinton dropped out after the Democratic nomination. According to a *New York Times* article comparing the two in 2008:

Mrs. Clinton and Ms. Palin have little in common beyond their breakout performances at the conventions and the soap opera aspects of their family lives. Mrs. Clinton always faces high expectations; Ms. Palin faced low expectations this week, and benefited from them. Mrs. Clinton can seem harsh when she goes on the attack; Ms. Palin has shown a knack for attacking without seeming nasty. Mrs. Clinton has a lot of experience; Ms. Palin, not so much. Mrs. Clinton is pantsuits; Ms. Palin is skirts. (Healy, September 2008)

Palin gained a strategic advantage when targeting women's issues, evidenced by her success among white female voters (Healy, September 2008) — and yet, though she found success claiming the female identity, using the stereotypes for her benefit, she always carried, and still does, the media mark of female incompetency (O'Malley, January 2016).

Incompetency is, perhaps, the strongest argument that follows women today. As religion and the unnatural “traditional defense” increasingly lose popularity in modern generations, incompetent becomes an easy replacement. Clark (1890) outlines many of the arguments that continue to follow women, even in the highest presidential races. He introduces female incompetency by first stating, “As an accompaniment, if not as a result, of this physical difference, we find also the peculiar qualities of heart and head which distinguish woman from man, and which must have recognition in considering the probable effect of her participation in the government” (Clark, 1890, para. 11). Here, Clark is blending unnatural with incompetent, one leading inherently to the other. That is, because women are naturally different than men, they also think differently and therefore, cannot make decisions about voting or hold a political position. While most modern news outlets keep their opinions on female competency to long-winded insinuations, like Healy's 2008 article above, Clark cuts to the point in 1890:

Women have, on the whole, less information on political subjects than have men. As their powers are of the domestic rather than the political sort, so their ordinary course of life is not such as to give them much knowledge of public questions or of the character of public men. They need special preparation in order to vote intelligently. (March 1890, para. 14)

Today, the media avoids direct attacks on candidate intelligence, especially around gender, and prefer critiques. However, *Fox News* is a modern example of media outlets using direct attacks that are broadcasted to millions of homes and viewers. From 2014 to 2016, *Fox* aired several segments that mocked Clinton's competency. One titled "Can you name one of Hilary Clinton's accomplishments?" asked viewers to send in their responses to the question and then shared the network's selected few. Of the responses, "Putting her foot in her mouth", "Leaving office", and ".. convincing a lot of people that she is qualified to be president without doing anything!" were selected to be shown on-air (Fox, 2011).

Even Sarah Palin faced *Fox News*' wrath. In 2011, *Fox News* aired a segment called "Should Obama Pay Attention to Sarah Palin?". In this segment, *Fox* commends Palin for her popularity among female voters and in the Republican party. They praise her as a "celebrity figure". Then, the panelists discuss approval numbers where they decide that the two male Republican 2012 presidential contenders, Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee, are more likely to win against Obama. Their reasoning:

Host 1: That said, I guess she was on Beck's radio show today, and she said "We have to stand by our allies North Korea" - and Glenn Beck corrected her on that but you know you can go back awhile with this and there was a time during the campaign when she didn't seem to know that North Korea was divided and there's a lot here.

Host 2: Yeah, that's the heart and soul of it. You see, once you look in the numbers and say well why do the American people have such a high negative favorability rating on Sarah Palin, it comes down to her quitting as the Governor of Alaska and there are just a

number of questions about whether she has the credibility or the knowledge base. (Fox, May 2011)

By framing Palin's blunder (she meant to say South Korea) as a lack of intelligence instead of what it more likely was, a slip of the tongue, *Fox News* created a narrative about Sarah Palin's incompetency. By comparing her indirectly with her male competitors, which they had no comments on other than that they found them more likely to successfully compete with Obama, Palin seemed inferior and less credible than her peers.

For Hillary Clinton, intelligence is what some theorists believe lost her the election (Kilgore, 2016). Sarah Palin found success in "owning" her gender and playing the perfect family woman, doted on by conservative media, yet lost. Clinton played the opposite and lost as well. The incompetent argument is tough to break because it has roots in the unnatural, as Clark demonstrated, just as the unnatural evolves to incompetent that then evolves again to unviable. The trifecta works as powerfully as it does because they are an interconnected cycle, flowing interchangeably, reused by media, again and again, leading to the final evolution, unviable.

## **Unviable**

Where does that leave women, in 2021? The lasting impression that women are unviable or unelectable, closing our unnatural, incompetent, and unviable trifecta. Falk argues that it is not the biased coverage that is the most worrisome - rather, it is the reduced likelihood of women running in the first place. By continuously framing women as unviable candidates by focusing on issues unrelated to policy, such as H3 issues, women gain a negatively skewed impression of

their chances of winning and thus dissuade them from entering politics and a continuing barrier to being elected if they chose to enter.

In 1890, Clark lays out his reasoning on women being unfit for politics:

The participation of women in politics would not result in a moral revolution; it would be less likely to elevate politics than to prove a misapplication of the emotional qualities of woman, where there is need rather for the rational quality of man; and it would tend to encourage misconceptions, already too prevalent, as to those forces that are most potential in moulding the character of individuals and of nations. (March 1890, para. 23)

Clark makes a few points, the strongest of which is women are emotionally unfit for politics. Their temperament is better suited for the schoolroom and the home. Temperament, explored by Clark, transforms over time to personality and charisma to talk about electability as society's preferences shift away from thinly veiled gendered attacks. Though called different things across eras, both precede arguments for a woman's un-electability or her unviability on the ballot. Gendered "code words" like likeability (Bleiweis, 2020) are modern takes on Clark's 1890's argument. Kim Elsassor of *Forbes* magazine notes a similar trend between Geraldine Ferraro's 1984 presidential run and the 2016 election cycle. In 1984, the Democratic presidential nominee Walter Mondale selected Ferraro as his vice-presidential running mate. She was the first female vice-presidential candidate to represent a major political party. In 2016, Hillary Clinton became the first woman as the Democratic presidential nominee. Elsassor summarizes their "unelectable" similarities well, "In 1984, voters attributed their negative attitudes to the fact that female candidates were not strong or tough enough to be president. That explanation no longer

fits with typical views of the world, and so a new explanation was needed. Over 30 years later, it isn't Clinton's or Warren's strength that is questioned but their likability." (Elsessor, 2019).

In a 2020 *Fox News* segment, Tucker Carlson dissects the downfall of Elizabeth Warren's 2020 presidential campaign. Elizabeth Warren ran as a Democratic presidential candidate in 2020 and leaned decidedly left. That is, compared to her Democratic competitors, she became known for her liberal views that may have pushed centrist voters away. She ultimately dropped out of the race and Joe Biden accepted the Democratic presidential nomination. Carlson, in the *Fox News* clip, claims Warren became "too woke", even for liberals. However, most of his monologue revolves around tearing Warren apart, characteristic by characteristic:

"So, officially, Elizabeth Warren's presidential campaign is still going. Nobody believes really it means anything. In fact, we can't really say at this point what she's really running for. Maybe she hopes to gain a few delegates she can exchange for a cabinet job. Maybe she wants to sabotage Bernie Sanders because he's a 'sexist!' and siphoning votes from him or maybe she just likes traveling around, giving speeches with lots of servants surrounding her and flying private on private planes which she loves to do ... Not even a campaign at this point, it's like a religious movement or a cult. Is this story even real? Who knows! Warren has been caught lying about so many things. Just imagine what she says when she can't be caught ... Warren's been lying for a long time, before she launched her campaign ... She wants to allow trans children to select her Secretary of Education. The wokeness has infected her brain, she's getting crazier and crazier ... Eventually, she was too much, even for liberals." (Carlson, February 2020).



Carlson plays into quite a few key stereotypes about women in under five minutes. In talking about Warren, Carlson calls her desperate, treacherous, greedy, arrogant, a liar, crazy, and “too much”. Hillary Clinton, too, faced claims of dishonesty, greed, and arrogance. These claims work doubly to both convince listeners that women are unfit to be president due to their personality traits or perceived charisma and also lead them to believe that other voters find them unelectable, too (Bleiweis, 2020). Voters want to choose the winning candidate and when they believe other voters find women unelectable, they become wary of supporting them. And yet, on the opposite side of the gender coin, Donald Trump survived and conquered the criticisms of his business practices, his wealth, and his secret tax returns because the media framed him as a successful man against Hillary Clinton’s lying woman (“Elections 2016: Trump voters”, 2016).

## **New Media**

Where mass media encapsulate the various mediums of traditional forms of communication, such as radio, television broadcast, and newspaper, new media spring from the internet age. It is any media delivered electronically, such as social media (Brosius and Karnowski, 2017). After decades of confinement to the medias’ lens, social media acts as a mighty tool for women candidates because social media changes the power dynamic.

In a study on the 2015 Israeli election, researchers found that the traditional media reported on men four times more often than women (Azran and Yarchi, 2018). However, when looking at social media, the authors found that women politicians generated twice as much engagement. Yarchi and Azran conclude that men receive “salient coverage” in the mass media while social media provides a “supportive environment” to women (2018). That is, women politicians exist in a “supportive environment” where their representation is completely in their

hands. Social media is a pipeline to voters, it allows candidates to broadcast their thoughts and ideas to voters instantaneously. It provides a space for direct communication between candidates and their base, a platform to be authentic without the skew of mass media frames. There is no middleman, no reporter asking gendered questions rather than policy ones, no hot button headline about an outfit or a leading expert weighing in on their temperament. It is, finally, the opportunity to carve their own narrative.

Hillary Clinton offers a strong example of women taking control of their narrative on social media because she existed in both eras. That is, she began her political career in the mass media era and ended it in the digital one. To shake the stereotypes placed upon her by news outlets, press events, and her competitor, she took to Twitter (McDonnell, 2020). Notably, she used traditionally masculine and cooperative language in each of her tweets. The combination of masculine and cooperative indicates that Clinton wished to be perceived as “assertive, competent, and direct” (McDonnell, 2020, p. 80). While the nation ultimately found her “cold” and “inauthentic”, it shows the power of social media. Twitter allowed Clinton to choose her language, to choose how she wished to be perceived, rather than limited to mass media’s framing and boundaries. However, it ultimately revealed the gender battle that continues to exist on and offline. In the same presidential election cycle that Clinton utilized Twitter, Trump adopted an opposite tactic. He used a significant amount of exclamation points and included drama, indicative of emotional or feminine language. In McDonald’s study of the two candidates’ Twitter accounts, she adds that Twitter is often thought of as personal, each tweet is directly from the hands of the individual, and the platform is perceived as interpersonal communication. This creates a layer of authenticity to the platform that influences voters based upon language and content choices (2020). McDonnell concludes that Trump’s feminine and emotional tweeting

style had the opposite effect of usual patterns. Typically, feminine language is considered lesser and weaker. However, Trump's use was interpreted as authentic and genuine, "a political outsider who was simply being himself" (McDonnell, 2020, p. 82) whereas Clinton seemed scripted.

Hillary Clinton's experience; however, is certainly not universal for women politicians on Twitter. United States Representative for New York's 14<sup>th</sup> congressional district, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, found wild success with her authentic, natural use of the platform. This may be attributed to her youth and lived experience using social media, whereas Clinton did not grow up in the internet age. After winning her race, Cortez grew to 3.3 million followers on the platform, up 2.6 million in the last eight months (Benwell, 2019). Her success is attributed to exactly what makes social media a powerful new tool for women in politics: she uses it to show voters her side of her own story, sometimes directly contradicting media stories about her. For example, she posted a photo of her shoes she campaigned in after a *Fox News* segment ran stating that she won for "demographic reasons" (Benwell, 2019). Along with the photo, she tweeted "Some folks are saying I won for "demographic" reasons. 1st of all, that's false. We won w/ voters of all kinds. 2nd, here's my 1st pair of campaign shoes. I knocked doors until rainwater came through my soles. Respect the hustle. We won bc we out-worked the competition. Period." (Ocasio-Cortez, 2018). In addition to writing her own narrative and carving her own identity in the tweet, Ocasio-Cortez uses photographic and anecdotal evidence to connect with her audience in a personal and emotive way.

## **Supporting Women on Social Media**

Twitter, as evidenced by the success of Ocasio-Cortez, is a powerful tool for women to level the political playing field, however; most scholars agree it has its downfalls, too. Di Meco finds that social media is a “double-edged sword”, a friend and a foe. It allows women to directly communicate with their audiences and the digital public at large, defining their own narrative, while also exposing themselves to endless attacks from critics, such as sexism, harassment, and threats (Di Meco, 2019). Just as women gain the ability to start and define conversations about their candidacy, so does every other user on a social media platform. At least, here, women can fight back.

Ultimately, the worst effects of the unnatural, incompetent, and unviable trifecta result in dissuading women from running for office (Falk, 2012). When women see themselves undermined on the highest political stage repeatedly, election cycle after election cycle, breaking the glass ceiling, as Hillary Clinton would say, seems impossible. While social media may be a double-edged sword, it offers a place where women create identities for themselves and access tools to take action on issues they care about (Keller, 2019). Over time, social media gives girls and women a sense of confidence in becoming political actors and wading into the public sphere. The question becomes, and the sentiment to take away is: Once women get there, what changes can be made to protect them?

In Di Meco’s spanning report on women, politics, and power in new media, she offers actionable solutions in four areas: media outlets, social media companies, political parties, and policy-making (2019). Across the board, Di Meco recommends bringing more women into leadership positions. Whether it be in the newsroom, on a board, or in a political party, Di Meco sees the key to political success for women is putting women into positions to allow for their

success. Another potential solution for all four areas is implementing training, like bias training and fair reporting training, and also training for women on how to use social media and increase digital literacy. When discussing traditional media like journalism, a path forward may be real and lasting punishments for those who fail to comply with sexism and harassment codes of conduct and awards for media outlets that demonstrate “gender sensitive” reporting (p. 44).

Di Meco (2019) covers a lot of ground in her solutions, reaching as far as the education field to suggest better teaching of digital literacy and skills to navigate a growing digital world. Her more compelling and harder to actualize suggestions revolve around placing responsibility on the social media industry. For example, Di Meco discusses the possibility of placing fines on social media companies for failing to remove abusive content. However, she mentions that social media companies declined her request for information and statistics on abusive content, begging the conclusion that companies are unlikely to agree to such fines. Her strongest arguments and perhaps the most obtainable are those related to empowering women on social platforms. Community building and education go hand in hand to help women use social media in a way that builds political confidence, creates and promotes female role models, and supports each other in the face of harassment or unfair biases.

## **Conclusions**

After 130 years of biased media reporting on women in political races, women deserve better – women deserve a fair platform and a fair chance at the highest level of American democracy. Social media offers that chance. Free of frames or media narratives, 140 characters to use freely, social media apps like Twitter create the opportunity for women to write new narratives and define and articulate their own opinions and identities. Where previous

generations relied on media broadcasts and commentary on women candidates, today's voters can access them directly and form their own conclusions – thanks to the modern era of social media.

While social media offers a solution to escaping the unnatural, incompetent, and unviable trifecta, it, too, bears weaknesses. Just as women politicians may use social media as they choose, so may everyone else. It is an open discussion, even to those who are hateful and cruel. Thus, progress must not stop at simply allowing women to occupy and utilize social media as a political space. Di Meco (2019) suggests actionable improvements to policies and organizational structures, like gender-bias training for journalists and better hate-speech regulation on social media. Continued innovation and improvements to the American media and political landscape, like Di Meco's, are necessary to continue leveling the playing field between men and women and necessary to, someday, electing a woman as president in America.

Before I completed this thesis, I had an idea in my head about women in politics. I think, to a degree, I agreed with many Americans that found women running for president to be too this or too that. They stood out from their male counterparts, and not in a particularly shining way. I knew I wanted a woman as American's next president and yet I didn't think we would have one. Through doing this thesis, I realized that my own impressions of women presidential candidates like Elizabeth Warren and Amy Klobuchar were rooted in the stories that the media told me my whole life. It was there that my interest formed, around the stories.

130 years is a long time to tell the same story. More than that, it's 130 years of different, individual, unique, and compelling female candidates reduced to the same story. I don't know what's next for women in politics and I don't know if we'll elect a woman as president in the next American election cycle. I am hopeful; however, that America's political future is largely in

the hands of a new, digital generation unsaddled with traditional views of gender and leadership. As new generations wield the power of the internet, America may see policy changes to reflect a more equal digital world like the regulations DiMeco prescribes or simply more women projecting their voices to be heard across the internet. It's unclear today what path to the female presidency is the right one but I, for one, am leaving this thesis excited for what's next.

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