

Gender as Political Tool: The Importance of Stressing the Normative in U.S.-American Presidential Candidates from 1952 – 2016

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Abstract:

Aidan Smith's *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency* places gender at the center of the U.S.-American political landscape. Revisiting the medial self-presentation of presidential candidates from 1952 to 2016, Smith takes these campaign communications as frames for negotiating notions of gender normativity and its appeal for the U.S.-American electorate. This interdisciplinary book combines approaches and concepts from media studies, gender studies and political science, and argues that contenders for the highest office in the United States rely on traditional gender norms for legitimizing their claims for power.

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Smith, Aiden. *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency*. New York: Routledge, 2017. 344 pages, 115 GBP. ISBN: 978-1-138-63354-4.

Abstract:

Aidan Smith's *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency* places gender at the center of the U.S.-American political landscape. Revisiting the medial self-presentation of presidential candidates from 1952 to 2016, Smith takes these campaign communications as frames for negotiating notions of gender normativity and its appeal for the U.S.-American electorate. This interdisciplinary book combines approaches and concepts from media studies, gender studies and political science, and argues that contenders for the highest office in the United States rely on traditional gender norms for legitimizing their claims for power.

Starting in the early 1950s and culminating in the most recent election, Smith's assessment of presidential campaigns sets out to deliver a comprehensive survey of the connections between gender and the American presidency. The introduction establishes how this "most gendered institution in the American political system" (p. 3) functions to advantage only those who adhere to a socio-culturally shared set of traditionally masculine, or respective feminine, traits. However, despite introducing 3 tropes of masculinity, Smith fails to clarify the definitions of heteronormativity, gender, and femininity/masculinity her book adheres to.

Chapter 2 focusses on the use of television as a new form of campaign communication in the elections of 1952 and 1956. This chapter, as well as the others, analyzes whether each presidential candidate adheres to, violates, or challenges the 3 tropes of masculinity, i.e. the *warrior hero*, the *self-made man*, and the *beneficent patriarch* (cf. p. 7 f.). In this context, the analysis of Adlai Stevenson's "cultural demasculinization" (p. 51) illustrates how opponents were otherized by linking political fears of communism to social anxieties about sexual nonnormativity.

Commenting on mass media's role in the making of a presidential candidate, Chapter 3 dissects John F. Kennedy's World War II experiences as the foundation for his popularity and electoral appeal. The chapter focusses on the public's changing assessment of the (potential) First Family. Stressing the importance of having children and wives for being perceived as virile and able to take care of political and biological offspring, Smith emphasizes Jackie Kennedy's role in her husband's election.

This importance of the nuclear family as attesting to masculinity and political power reemerges in the fourth chapter, which reflects on Jimmy Carter's failings to be perceived as a masculine, strong leader. The chapter connects the Iran Hostage Crisis, the first use of a candidate's wife, Nancy Reagan, as a surrogate for her husband on the political stage (cf. p. 112 f.), and a shift in the Republican party to pursue a policy that advocates traditional gender roles.

The fifth chapter picks up on the influence(s) of First Ladies for their husbands' political ambitions. Tracing back the public's interest in the marital and sexual lives of the contenders to the Gary Hart scandal in 1987 (cf. p. 138), the chapter looks at Laura Bush's appearance, Hillary Clinton's untraditional femininity, and Teresa Heinz-Kerry's financial independence. Smith succeeds in pointing out how these women's gender performances influenced their husbands' public perception by either stressing their status as patriarch as opposed to sexual actor (Bush), questioning their ability to control their wife and be her champion (Clinton), or by challenging their traditional male gender role as breadwinner (Kerry).

Smith uses these gendered expectations in Chapter 6 to show how they influenced the public's assessment of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. The analysis of Obama leveraging his gender against his race is developed plausibly, and adds insights into female gender roles and the political consequences of not adhering to them for Clinton. This chapter is Smith's first to analyze the connections between normative gender, race, and class in detail. Yet, it does not critically assess these intersections with regard to their consequences: Commenting on the reinforcement of social hierarchies and stereotypes by adhering to normative notions of gender, race, and class would have emphasized the feminist intersectional approach of Smith's analysis.

Comparing Clinton's gender performance in the elections of 2008 and 2016, Chapter 7 asserts that even adhering to traditional femininity failed to trump "the most aggressive hetero-masculinity" (p. 204) her opponent displayed. The chapter places Donald Trump's political rise within the wider logic of presidential candidates' adherence to gender norms, and thereby adds substantiality to the claim that the election's outcome "should have been expected, given the nation's recent and historical investment in heteronormative political leadership" (ibid.). The thorough analysis of gender norms,

politically opposing views, and the instrumentalization of the extended family for gaining public support underlines this chapter's value for Smith's line of argumentation, which is succinctly summed up in the conclusion.

Smith's *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency* provides the reader with a coherent overview of normative gender's role in presidential candidates' representations. Notably, Smith consistently displays a binary understanding of gender, limiting her observations to a rather narrow, and arguably incomplete assessment of its performative scope. Although her focus is on normativity and thus on masculine and feminine gender norms, approaching this binarism would have added to her overall assessment of gender's implications in the realm of the U.S.-American presidency.

The lack of coherent terminology challenges the reader's understanding of the employed concepts and contributes to the impression that the book is written for an audience who intuitively understands the author's stance. Who this audience is, however, does not become entirely clear: Whether the book aims at analyzing campaign commercials and the medial use of masculine tropes, the cultural implications of patriarchizing the U.S.-American presidency, the social constraints gender norms place on public figures, or all of the above seems to depend on the respective chapter. Despite this equivocal initial premise, the book manages to cover all of these topics, but at the expense of each analysis' range and the possibility of situating the book within a specific discourse. Especially the innovative concept of "compensatory heterosexuality" (p. 8) and the intersectional mode of inquiry would have benefitted from a slimmer research focus, allowing more space to develop them.

Despite these aspects, *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency* understands how to capture the reader's attention by incorporating telling anecdotes about the candidates and their lives. Although these excursions sometimes seem to distract from the main points, Smith succeeds in tying all aspects together. The book's language is clear and accessible; the chapters follow a logical order both in terms of chronology and reasoning. Even if one is not primarily interested in assessments of campaign advertisements, this book can be recommended to anyone looking for an introduction to gender and the U.S.-American presidency, U.S.-American cultural studies, and gender in U.S.-American politics.

German Abstract:

Gender als politisches Werkzeug: Von der Wichtigkeit, das Normative in US-amerikanischen Präsidentschaftskandidierenden von 1952 – 2016 hervorzuheben

Aidan Smiths *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency* positioniert Gender im Zentrum der US-amerikanischen politischen Landschaft. Indem sie die mediale Selbstdarstellung der Präsidentschaftskandidierenden von 1952 bis 2016 Revue passieren lässt, nimmt Smith diese Wahlkämpfe als Rahmen, um Gender Normativität and deren Wirkung auf die US-amerikanische Wählerschaft zu analysieren. Das interdisziplinäre Buch vereint Ansätze und Konzepte der Medienstudien, Gender Studies und Politikwissenschaften und argumentiert, dass die Anwärter_innen auf das höchste Amt der Vereinigten Staaten sich auf traditionelle Gender Normen berufen, um ihre Machtansprüche zu legitimieren.

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