

The Unequal Participation of Women In United States Politics

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Abstract

United States politics largely lack the participation of women. This lack of participation has been trending consistently downwards even though more and more women find themselves in professional careers. The purpose of this research project was to discover why it is that women do not participate at the same rates as men in politics but to do so within a cultural framework. I arrived at my conclusion through an extensive literature review and the conduction of four, in depth, semi-structured interviews. What I discovered is that most of the discrepancy can be attributed to gender roles that exist in the United States that are reinforced by the media. The media influences the way people view themselves as well as how they view other people. The media in the United States hyper masculinizes politics and portrays it indirectly as a place for men, and simultaneously hyper sexualizes women and drives down their self confidence or desire to participate because of the criticism they face not based on their intellect but for their physical appearance.

Background

In my research I addressed the question of *why women in the United States do not participate in politics at equal rates as men?* Because I wanted to answer this question within a cultural framework, I addressed it through the theme of *gender roles*. I asked the question why women have not been traditionally included at equal rates in politics, and then asked again what has changed and why has this *persisted over time*. I wanted to discover what it was about U.S. culture that made it unique, especially in its concerns for democratic values. The United States claims to be the most democratic country in the world, but has never properly represented women politically. For 140 years, the United States legally excluded women from its politics. As women have heightened their status in society and worked diligently to create space at the table for themselves, they have been presented with other indirect forms of exclusion. Because of traditional gender roles in U.S. culture, women did not have time to participate in politics due to their homemaking and child rearing role (Eagly 1984). As this role has evolved and more and more women join the workforce, there still remains a large discrepancy in women's participation. Why? This now can largely be attributed to the misrepresentation of women in the media (Newsom 2011).

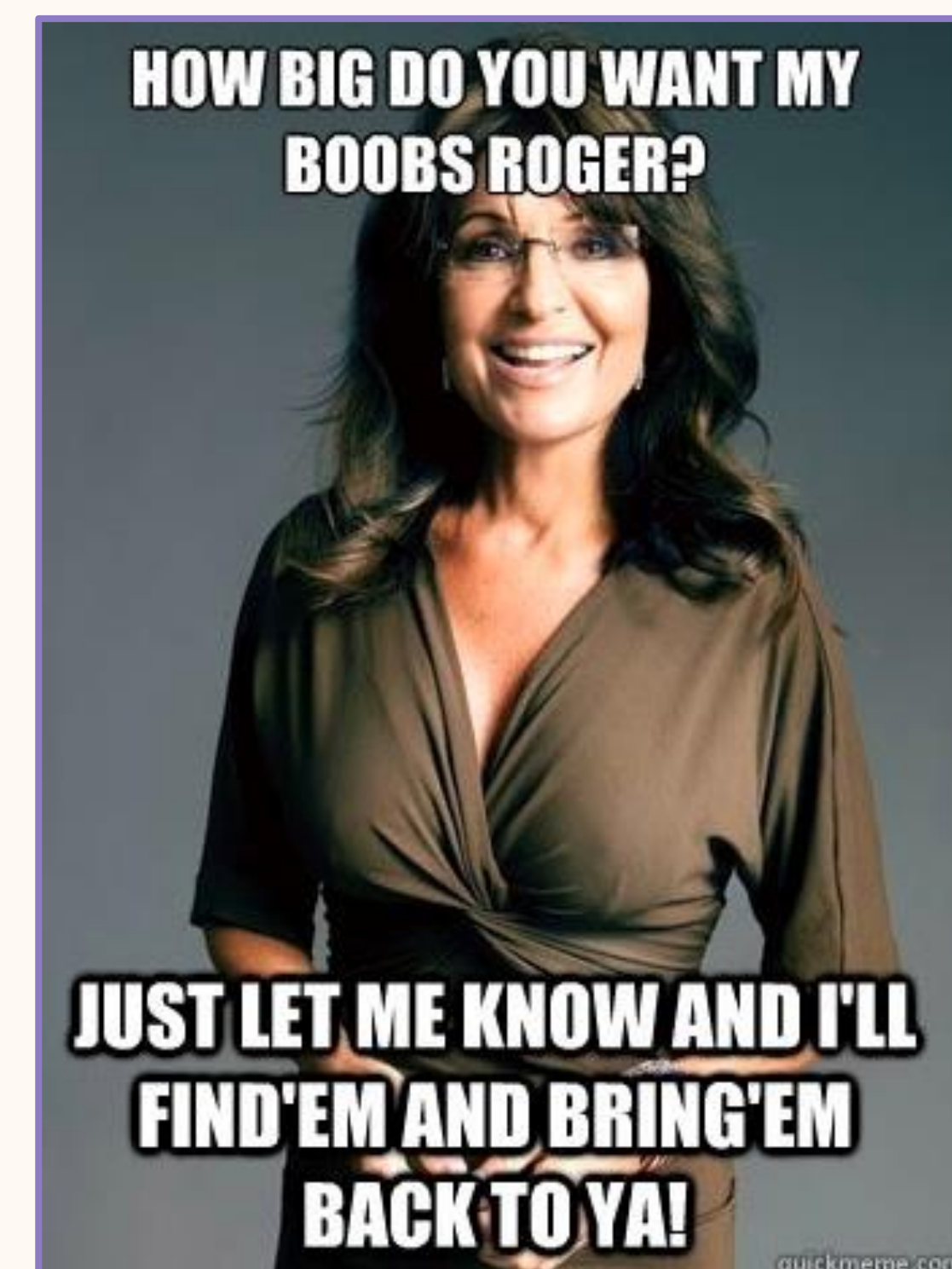
Methodology

I want to understand why women, especially women who are educated and qualified, do not want to or are less likely to participate in politics than males in the United States. The methods I used in efforts to discover this were a literature review and interviews. My literature review consists of 6 different pieces of scholarship, from which I analyzed the work that has come before this project to help understand trends and identify major pieces of information that contribute to this phenomenon, such as traditional gender norms, historically male dominated political realm, changes in women's roles in United States culture, and unique media representation of gender (Holman 2018).

My interviews were guided, open ended questions that discussed people's educational experiences, if they had any strong women influences growing up, their interests in politics, if they thought about entering into politics, if they feel they are/were ever qualified, whether or not they were encouraged to take on leadership roles, especially in adolescence. I asked if there were certain things that deterred them from participating in politics. For the people involved in politics I asked about their unique experiences that made them arrive at their position, specific encouragement they received, particular qualifications etc.

When I analyzed the data gathered for the project, I sifted through interviews for commonalities, while also keeping in mind the distinct experiences of each individual which has created their social situation. I also paid close attention to how their lives have been affected and influenced by the media, as I see that being one of the main contributions to confidence levels and in turn, political efficacy.

Figure 1



<http://theimmoralmajority.blogspot.com/2013/06/conservative-reporter-says-that.html>

Results

I found that women's participation in politics still relies heavily on gender norms in United States culture. These gender norms have changed greatly over time and continue to influence women, but the greatest and most consistent factor that affected women's level of participation was the media. The social norms that exist in U.S. culture are often reiterated to people through the media, which has a great effect on how people view themselves.

I organized my results along the main trends that I identified throughout my scholarship research and interviews. The themes were these:

- Expectation of Criticism
- Differing Views Based on Gender
 - Male POV
 - Female POV
- Social Conditioning in United States Culture

Women in the spotlight expect to be criticized by the media based on their appearance; this is a social norm in United States culture. Even if women have high self confidence regardless of their relationship with social media, they are still more likely to be subject to criticism based on their appearance (Bauer 2015). Because of the media's representation of women, they are more likely to be subject to negative opinions based on their physical appearance rather than their intellectual capabilities. This is why for many women, it is intimidating to become involved in politics even if they have great intellectual confidence.

I found men to believe that women were more deterred to participate in politics because they did not want to be a part of contentious environments. One male respondent with significant experience in a state legislature made the comparison to sports participation. He said that males are more likely to participate in more aggressive and contentious sports than women, something that carries over into other areas of life.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research project was to discover why women participate at lower rates in politics than men, especially those women that are equally qualified. Why is women's participation in the workforce going up and their political participation not? The contentious and competitive nature of politics can be discouraging to some, but don't apply to all. The only explanation that applies exclusively to females is their treatment and representation by the media. Women are hypersexualized across the board of United States media. Even if it doesn't exclusively affect the self confidence of all women, it affects the way that all women are treated and portrayed by media outlets, and the way people view them. They are clearly held to different standards within the media, which is mainly run by men.

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