Illmuminating gender biases in US presidential race

April 11 2016, by Tom Mclaughlin

When sophomore Colin Sheehan was enrolling for the fall 2015 semester, he needed one more class that fit his schedule.

So he decided to take the course "Women and American Politics" with Kelly Dittmar, an assistant professor of political science at Rutgers University-Camden.

As Sheehan began concentrating on instances of gender bias discussed in class, Sheehan suddenly noticed that it was everywhere – on television, in his daily conversations with others, and even in the subtle differences in body language that people exhibited depending on whether they were speaking to a man or a woman.

"I knew of gender bias, but I never realized how prevalent it is all around us," says Sheehan, a Rutgers–Camden Civic Scholar. "Now I knew how to recognize it and it fascinated me."

In turn, Dittmar recognized Sheehan's analytical eye and the quality of his writing, and asked him to join the research team for Presidential Gender Watch 2016. The nonpartisan project focuses on tracking and illuminating gender biases in the U.S. presidential election – in the news, in debates or in how candidates present themselves to voters.

"I am thrilled – and grateful – that Colin signed on to work with me on this project," says Dittmar. "Colin's thoughtfulness and perspective are great assets to this project. I look forward to finding many opportunities

for him to share his voice with our Gender Watch audience through Election Day."

Sheehan is fast becoming an invaluable contributor to the project, run under the auspices of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University-New Brunswick, which monitors and shares news focusing on gender issues and gender bias in the way it is written.Researchers also conduct analysis of issues coming to the fore in the election through a gender lens.

In addition to monitoring the media, Sheehan offers his own astute analysis writing for the project's blog, in the hope that others will take note of the pervasive – but often overlooked – ways that gender bias permeates the presidential race. For instance, in a recent post, "Pronouns Matter: Her, Him, and How We Talk About the Presidency," Sheehan draws attention to how candidates commonly refer to the office of the presidency using masculine pronouns: "he" and "his."

Sheehan acknowledges in the blog that the candidates most likely aren't intending to present sexist messages, and are perhaps envisioning themselves as president. Furthermore, U.S. presidents have all been male thus far and even the framers of the U.S. Constitution used the word "he" to refer to the role of the president.

Nonetheless, he writes, "Despite this masculine precedent, we still have a responsibility to call out these word choices as the sexist microaggressions they are."

Sheehan cautions that, in his opinion, gender bias often isn't intentional or done maliciously to hurt anyone. However, he affirms, such biases have consequences and, only by making people aware of these issues, can they be resolved.

"Some things are so small and simple to change," says Sheehan. "It's not something that will change overnight and a lot of it will depend on how we raise our children. Bringing awareness to these issues is just the first of many steps."

For Sheehan, the chance to share his perspective suits his driving desire to be a force for positive change. In addition to his work on the Gender Watch 2016 project, he can often be found in Rutgers–Camden's Office of Civic Engagement, where he assists Chris Countryman, program coordinator for student civic engagement. He also volunteers at various service sites, such as Joseph's House of Camden and KIPP Cooper Norcross Academy.

It was Sheehan's mission to effect change on a lasting, policy level that actually drew him to political science. Initially focused on studying history, he realized that there were lessons to be learned from the past, and he wanted to be part of putting those lessons into action.

"Knowing what we know from history, where can we go from here?" asks Sheehan. "I want to be right there, involved in making those changes."

Building on his experience working on the project, Sheehan plans to earn a juris doctor degree and assist officeholders or candidates behind the scenes conducting policy analysis with a focus on gender bias.

"The idea that there are many things that can affect women differently than men is something that gets routinely overlooked," says Sheehan. "If I can help bring that to peoples' attention, it can impact what decisions they make and what they support."

Provided by Rutgers University

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