

Op-ed says Clinton may have lost election due to 'systemic gender discrimination'

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Despite being described by former U.S. President Barack Obama as the most-qualified presidential nominee in U.S. history, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 campaign for the highest office in the

land. That outcome may have been the result of systemic gender discrimination, according to psychologists at Rice University.

Authors Abby Corrington, a Rice psychology Ph.D. student, and Mikki Hebl, the Martha and Henry Malcolm Lovett Chair of Psychology in Rice's School of Social Sciences, drew upon existing psychological research to offer possible explanations for Clinton's loss. Their op-ed, "America Clearly Isn't Ready for a Female President: Why?", will appear in an upcoming edition of *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*.

"We ultimately decided to focus on this topic to discuss how gender may have influenced the 2016 election, and what that means for us moving forward," Corrington said. "We wanted to discuss the theoretical reasons for the 2016 election outcome."

The researchers outlined four gender-related theories that they believe serve as possible explanations for why Clinton fell short in the election, and they offered suggestions for future female candidates.

Sexism

According to Corrington and Hebl, sexism—defined as prejudice, stereotyping or discrimination on the basis of sex—can take a variety of forms, as exemplified by the theory of ambivalent sexism. Ambivalent sexism comprises two subgroups of sexism: hostile sexism, which reflects overtly negative evaluations and stereotypes about a gender (for example, the ideas that [women](#) are incompetent and inferior to men), and [benevolent sexism](#), which represents evaluations of gender that may appear subjectively positive (for example, the belief that women can and should rely on men for protection) but are actually more broadly damaging to people and gender equality.

"Women are frequently subtyped into different categories, such as housewives, career women, babes and feminists," Corrington said.

"Hostile sexism is usually directed toward women who challenge men's power and [traditional gender roles](#), whereas benevolent sexism is typically reserved for women who endorse male power and traditional gender roles."

Corrington said that given the research on the negative views toward nontraditional women (such as career women and feminists), it should come as no surprise that, since Clinton is perhaps the quintessential nontraditional "career woman," she would be subject to ambivalent (and often overt) sexism, rendering her election to the presidency unlikely.

Social role theory

Social role theory suggests that the principal cause of sex-based differences in social behavior is the distribution of men and women into distinct social roles and with different associated behaviors, Corrington and Hebl said.

"Men in the U.S. tend to be more prevalent in positions of power, such as in business and politics," Corrington said. "And traditionally, women in the U.S. have been the homemakers and caregivers. Even as women have entered the workforce, they tend to receive lower salaries, converge in certain occupations and rarely occupy the highest levels of organizational hierarchies. The combination of the gender-based division of labor and the fact that women have less power, lower status and fewer resources than men in most societies is the underlying cause of gender-based differences in social behavior.

"Women are known traditionally for displaying communal (interpersonally facilitative, friendly) behaviors, while men are characterized for their displays of agentic (independent, assertive)

behaviors," she said. "Research shows that when men, and especially women, deviate from these expected behaviors, they face backlash."

Corrington said that Clinton's display of agentic behavior as she sought what is arguably the most powerful leadership position in the world could explain her negative evaluation by voters.

Stereotype content model

Stereotype content model is a theory that group stereotypes and interpersonal impressions form along two dimensions: warmth and competence. Corrington said that individuals from out-groups (social groups with which the perceiver does not identify) are rarely seen as high in both warmth and competence and that positive stereotypes on one dimension act jointly with negative stereotypes on the other dimension to maintain the advantage of the more-privileged group.

She said that traditionally, subgroups of women such as career-oriented women and female athletes are viewed as competent but not warm, and groups such as housewives and "chicks" are viewed as warm but not competent.

While one might imagine that a career woman engaged in the highest-status competition in the nation would be perceived as low in warmth and high in competence, Corrington said, this was not entirely true.

"Despite the description of Hillary Clinton by former President Barack Obama as 'the most-qualified candidate' to ever pursue the presidency, it seems this sentiment was not shared as broadly as his statement suggests, meaning that Clinton was not able to enjoy the usual benefit of being perceived as a 'career woman,'" she said. "Not only was she perceived as lacking warmth, but due to a series of incidents such as use of a private network server, leaked DNC emails and 'flip-flopping' on issues, she was

also perceived as lacking competence."

Corrington said that the irony in how Clinton was perceived was that Donald Trump had no experience in politics or foreign policy, but was elected president.

"This is a clear example of men and women being judged according to different standards," she said. "And a possible explanation for the different standards is that overall, individuals are used to seeing men in positions of power, which could be why voters were more likely to look past perceptions of low competence for Donald Trump than they were for Hillary Clinton."

System justification theory

System justification theory proposes that people have several underlying needs, which vary from individual to individual, that can be satisfied by the defense and justification of the status quo, even when it may be disadvantageous to certain people, Corrington and Hebl said.

Corrington said that previous psychology research suggests that humans have a fundamental desire to reduce uncertainty, threat and social discord. One study in particular found that when white Americans whose ethnicity is a central aspect of their identity—regardless of whether they were Democrats or Republicans—were reminded of the fact that members of nonwhite racial groups will become the demographic majority in the U.S. by 2042, they expressed greater concern about the declining status and influence of white Americans, increased support for Trump and anti-immigration policies and increased their resistance to political correctness.

Corrington said this finding from previous research is a good example of how the system justification theory played out in the 2016 election.

"When white individuals were reminded that members of their race would be outnumbered by members of other races, they reacted strongly against that notion by supporting Trump and policies that they thought would reinforce their dominance, even if those policies may be disadvantageous to some people," Corrington said. "Voters may have perceived Clinton's political platform as one that would be threatening to this dominance."

As indicated by the title of their op-ed, Corrington and Hebl concluded that American is not ready for a woman president, and they suggested the following four solutions, guided by each of the previously discussed theories, to assure that the next qualified female candidate gets a fair shot at the presidency.

- More women must get into politics. Politics cannot be seen as a man's sphere only; there must be more female exemplars, and they must be distributed throughout the political spectrum—from city councils to oval offices.
- People must be more aware of not only the overt sexism they harbor and express but also the ambivalent sexism they hold.
- People must be more aware of the stereotype content model and how people judge men and women according to different standards.
- Men must understand that the placement of women in positions of power does not displace them.

"The election of Donald Trump to the presidency is an indication that we have a long way to go before we see a female president," Corrington and Hebl said. "But our hope is that Nov. 8, 2016, and the years that follow are simply the soil in which the seeds of change are being planted."

More information: Abby Corrington et al. America clearly is not ready for a female president: why?, *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An*

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