

Q&A: Kamala Harris' hidden foe—pervasive bias against powerful middle-aged women

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The campaign of former President Donald Trump is already trying to attack his Democratic opponent, Kamala Harris, in a way that will trigger negative public reactions based negative stereotypes, says Jennifer A. Chatman, a Berkeley scholar in psychology and leadership. Credit: Adam Schultz / Biden for President

In the span of a few short weeks, Kamala Harris has burst from the shadows of the U.S. vice presidency to the role of joyful warrior running for the most powerful political position on Earth. But even as she

prepares to take on former Republican President Donald Trump, Harris is confronting another, almost invisible opponent: a pervasive, deep-seated bias against middle-aged women who rise to power.

Researchers at the UC Berkeley Haas School of Business have detailed how widely held, but often subconscious, stereotypes create a clear vulnerability for middle-aged professional [women](#). And the threat will shape Harris' campaign, even as it extends to ambitious women across the nation—in politics, in board rooms and organizations at every level.

One research [paper](#), by Professors Jennifer A. Chatman, Laura J. Kray and their co-authors, explores how ancient expectations about men as breadwinners and women as caregivers still exert a deep influence, even after an era of massive social change.

Those stereotypes expect women to be warm and nurturing. But as these women achieve strength and success—"agency," in the authors' words—they are in effect defying expectations. And for that, they often pay social and economic penalties.

In middle age, these successful women are seen as less likable and less hireable. Their performance evaluations decline, as well, even compared to evaluations they received when they were younger and less experienced. Male leaders face no such expectations, the researchers found, and they pay no such penalties.

Chatman, a psychologist and leadership expert, has just been named interim dean at Berkeley Haas. In an interview, she told UC Berkeley News that these deep-wired biases are so powerful that they could disrupt Harris' support in November. And the Trump campaign, she said, is already working to trigger the biases among voters.

Berkeley News: You use such an interesting

characterization—you say successful middle-aged women are penalized for, well, for being middle-aged and successful. How does this work on the ground?

Jennifer Chatman: We think that these questions are very important, particularly for professional women, because we know that there are systemic barriers, like the so-called "glass ceiling." And we're trying to explain whether there's something about the way women progress in their careers that automatically leads to fewer opportunities than comparable men would experience.

One explanation is that when women move from being youthful to middle age, they are granted greater agency than when they're younger, greater respect for their competence—that's a great improvement. But along with this respect for their agency, they're also automatically viewed as less warm. And because warmth is a much more gender-prescribed attribute for women, this has heavy consequences for them.

Younger women are viewed as warm and less agentic. They're not threatening.

What are the implications for Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democrats' all-but-certain nominee for president? Won't she have to go up against our stereotypes in this way?

Yes. Men can just show how capable they are. It doesn't really matter if they're warm. They have less to worry about.

Because of these deep-seated expectations, women are thinking, "I want to show my competence, but I also need to reassure people that I'm not

going to mow them over." It requires all sorts of nuanced thinking and planning and trying to get it just right, which ultimately may not succeed anyway, because you're fighting these very strongly held stereotypes that put women in a double bind.

So what do we say to Kamala Harris, or other rising women leaders? I look at Nancy Pelosi and how politically astute she is. The New Yorker just had an article about her political prowess and compared her to Lyndon Johnson, who was one of the giants of political power. She is masterful. She brings her full self to the job and doesn't apologize for being powerful. That's probably what women are going to need to continue to do.

Which is what I see Kamala Harris doing. I know she has a good sense of humor. She's laughing, and that's good. She should show her personality and her humanity. I don't think that overthinking is a pathway to success.

Women need to do the good job that they're capable of and not apologize for their own capability.

And yet, would you say that women leaders up to now often have had to apologize?

When Amy Klobuchar [the U.S. senator from Minnesota] was running for president, certainly when Hillary Clinton was running for president, we heard all kinds of whispers: "Oh, she is really mean to her staff." You never hear that about men, right? And we know that Donald Trump is a screamer, but no one seems to hold that against him.

What our research shows is that women are going to be suspected of all of these low-warmth behaviors, even if it's not true about them, simply because they're capable.

You have to continue to do your good job and understand that those perceptions are going to arise. I wish I had a magic bullet for this. There's been progress, but clearly it's going to take more time.

Do you think the force of these core stereotypes is so strong that it can literally damage or derail a politician in a given race or a political career?

Yes, and it's risky to dismiss this reality and to fail to recognize that these forces are operating. But undermining your message and trying to conceal your agency by being more warm is the wrong solution.

I remember talking to the new CEO of a tech company, a woman. On her first day, she came in and said, "You know, just like all of you, I'm really afraid of what's coming next." She kind of expressed what she thought was vulnerability that people could relate to.

It completely backfired. They thought that she was totally incapable of doing the job. And it hurt her for a long, long time. She had to dig out of that hole.

So I think women need to be very careful in how they reveal their vulnerability or their humanity. I think humor and laughing is a great way to do so. Not laughing at people, but showing joy and enthusiasm. Those are very appealing attributes, and I think they're consistent with what we think of communality for women.

But I don't think that women should try to look less powerful in order to satisfy the expectation that they're warm. That's a mistake.

Let's talk more about the presidential campaign. Will it be possible for Harris' opponents, the Trump

campaign, to exploit public stereotypes about women of middle age—to exploit the biases and to undermine her in that way?

I absolutely expect them to do that. I mean, politics has gotten very personal in the Trump era. He has names for people. If he were a comic, he'd be an insult comic, and sadly, we've seen people kind of gravitate toward that. Unfortunately, it's not very funny.

So I fully expect that to happen. We've already heard it—calling her a DEI hire, that's a hit at her agency, obviously. They're trying to downplay her accomplishments. When they say she laughs too much, they are intimating that she's not a serious thinker. She doesn't have any gravitas.

Trump also claimed that suddenly she's identifying as Black. Of course, he's trying to portray her as manipulative and power-hungry, which are especially unattractive features for women.

Every time you hear a personal attack like this, there is an underlying stereotype that they're trying to activate that will work against her.

Should we assume these efforts to leverage the stereotypes against Harris would continue if she's elected president?

Absolutely. And think of this example: her name, and the intentional mispronunciation of her name. Her real title is Vice President Harris. Harris is easy to pronounce, right? Why is everyone calling her by her first name?

Everyone calls Trump by his last name. They should call her by her last name. It's easier to pronounce, and it's more correct given her status as the Vice President of the United States. But because she's a woman, it's a way of familiarizing her and [notching down her status and power](#).

That was true for Hillary Clinton, too, don't you think?

Yes. That's right.

We didn't call her husband Bill. We mostly didn't call President Obama by his first name, Barack.

And we didn't call either President Bush George.

Kamala Harris has been dealing with this through all of her jobs. She's worked in domains that are heavily male-dominated. It is not going to be a surprise to her. The U.S. Senate, attorney general of California—these were male-dominated professions. So she's not inexperienced in this.

Here's the challenge: Do not get derailed by these irrational expectations. Continue to do the best job you know how to do. Trust in your own judgment and competence. And then move forward.

You suggest in the paper that these stereotypes, when they're broadly applied, have the effect of reinforcing traditional systems of male dominance, patriarchal systems. Can you elaborate on this?

There's a psychological reason that we cling on to these stereotypes, and a sociological reason.

The psychological reason is that these are heuristics—shortcuts that help us size up people quickly—so that every time we meet a new person, we don't have to say, "Okay, this person is a woman, and this person is —."

Stereotypes actually help us. It would be too cognitively costly for us if, every time we encountered a new person or a new object we had to think about what all the features of that person or object are. The problem is that stereotypes are over-applied. Instead of a shortcut, we're drawing incorrect conclusions.

The sociological reason is perhaps even more insidious. There are established power hierarchies, and the powerful are never motivated to give up their power.

One could think about the whole Trump movement as being an attempt by the white male power structure to hold onto power. They see it slipping away from them. And that may be why identity politics are so prevalent in the last 10 or 20 years in the conservative movement.

They're focused on abortion restrictions and stopping legislation around discrimination. The real explanation is that the powerful are getting nervous that they're losing their power, and they don't want to give it up graciously or with enthusiasm.

And yet, for example, we've made so much progress on race relations, racial equity. We're far from perfect, but we've evolved measurably. Similarly, we're providing more opportunity, more influence—more power—to women. If this evolution continues, even if it's a difficult passage, will the culture change in such a way that our stereotypes also

change? Will we evolve our way out of this?

I think we will, yes. I'm very, very hopeful. And there's already evidence that we have. If you look worldwide—Mexico, which arguably is an even more patriarchal society with religious overtones, just elected Claudia Sheinbaum, a Jewish woman with a Ph.D. in physics.

In some ways, I think we're seeing this backlash so strongly right now because it's possible that we're at a precipice where we can really make some strides—if we get through this period. We're really pushing on what have been norms for a couple of centuries.

Last question: If Kamala Harris were to win—maybe even if she doesn't win—Isn't it inevitable that she is a role model, or a mentor, to millions of women who are watching her and thinking about their own careers and their own struggle against stereotypes?

The achievements that Vice President Harris has had, and the fact that she's in this position now, are deeply meaningful, inspiring and motivating for all kinds of people. And even if she doesn't win, we're that much closer to the possibility that people who have been viewed as needing to stay in their warmth box and not their agency box are going to have the same opportunities that other leaders have had. I think it's inevitable.

But you also saw that she was only considering white men as her running mates. Gretchen Whitmer (the governor of Michigan) surfaced and then quickly moved aside. Everyone was asking: "Does the U.S. have the appetite for two candidates who are different, who defy the stereotypes?" So it's a gradual progress.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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