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Women in Politics

Final Research Paper

## **Introduction**

As more and more women of all different varieties have entered political spheres around the world over the last hundred years or so, many things have become evident about the way that these women are treated in systems designed by and for men. While not all women are alike, it is still striking in how many basic considerations of the very fact of womanhood have come into fundamental conflict when met with political structures that never considered that women might ever be involved. The very real expectations that still exist for women to have children and be heavily involved with the raising of those children is one example—women who enter politics despite having kids have to make sacrifices in order to expend the time and energy required to get elected to office. At the same time, women who fail to meet the “mother” stereotype in politics (either by prioritizing their career over their children or not having children in the first place) are often penalized by being portrayed as cold and uncaring.

Another such dichotomy surrounds the topic of marriage in politics for women. The symbols of marriage and children are the most prominent reminders of the traditional roles women have played in society for centuries. Despite progressive advancements in culture, it stands to reason that if the status of motherhood or lack thereof is still something that women are

judged for when they are in the political space, then marital status will be as well. That is the topic that this research paper seeks to explore.

## **Research Question**

The key question this paper asks is: how are single or unmarried women treated differently than married women when running for public office? There are some underlying assumptions and conditions threaded through this question that are first worth addressing before moving further.

The first of those assumptions is that society at large seeks cohesion and generally tries to maintain a status quo. The merits of what this status quo encompasses in its entirety, as well as if this is a good thing and who the status quo benefits, are topics for a much broader paper than this. For the purposes of this specific paper, a key assumption is that the norm of most people pairing up into monogamous couples at some point is a status quo society tries to maintain, whether for reasons of population replacement, religious purposes, or even simple romantic ideals about what is required for human happiness. With this assumption in mind, it stands to reason that if one type of relationship status is the “ideal” that society writ large believes the population as a whole should strive for, all other relationship statuses fall in to some sort of ranking with one (marriage) being the most desirable at one end of the spectrum, being in a relationship in the middle, and being single at the other end of the spectrum.

In order to maintain social cohesion, societal structures and practices then therefore have an incentive to reward people for achieving and maintaining the most desirable relationship status, and enact penalties for those who stray further to the opposite end of the spectrum from

this status. In short: society teaches us from a young age that married people are the most happy and that single people are unilaterally miserable. Neither of those things are universally true, of course, but the important part is not necessarily the truth nor even why the narrative exists or who it actually benefits. Instead, for the purposes of the research question, it is only crucial to accept that the narrative *does* exist, and that those with the desired relationship status of marriage will be treated in accordance to that status—which is to say, more favorably than those with the opposite status.

Also important to note before proceeding any further is the fact that in addressing the research question, single women are grouped together with the other more broad category of “unmarried” women. Single women are, of course, unmarried, but the term can also be applied to those in relationships as well. In a more intensive deep dive, it would be worth dissecting how women in politics are treated based on whether they are single OR in a relationship OR married by examining case studies from women with each status. The motivations and narratives surrounding women who are in no relationship at all are naturally very different from those who are in relationships, due to the fact that the latter fits slightly better into the established social structure. Therefore, grouping them together against all married women is perhaps simplistic and dilutes some of the specific ways each could be treated differently. There are two main reasons this paper chooses to do so regardless. One is scope—to accurately pay tribute to all the factors in play would require a much longer examination than what this paper can accomplish. Focusing solely on married women as one category and everyone else as another still allows for an exploration of the topics of marriage, women, and the political process without expanding this into a much larger endeavor. The second reason for the simplification is the nature of data and research available on this topic. Regrettably, there is a limited amount of work on this specific

subject area, and even less that meets certain content requirements. There is little data available on the relationship statuses of women in politics even in the United States and the West in the modern era, and exponentially less on other countries or of a historical nature. Simplification of the parameters of the research question allows for more research to be considered in this case.

Lastly, this paper's research question deals specifically with women when they are in the process of campaigning for public office—not necessarily what happens if they are elected to that office. The reasoning behind this is that more narratives, particularly those regarding the character of a politician and their suitability for office, will be present when those messaging tactics will be in full effect. Noting cases of “superstar” politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for the Democrats or Marjorie Taylor Greene for the Republicans to be exceptions, as a general rule most average citizens don't think much about their specific elected officials or what they think of them outside of the regular election cycle. Therefore, it's unlikely that big messages about a specific non-national politician currently in office will even reach the point of being notable, let alone break through to average constituents outside of the campaign. In most cases, narratives about a person's marital status will really only show up during the campaign when voters are being bombarded with messaging, and thus it makes the most sense to focus on this time period as one of the conditions for the research.

### **Thesis Claim**

Jumping off from the premise of the research question, the hypothesis of this query is that because married women fit more easily into the established patriarchal societal structure since

they are of the “desired” societal relationship status, they also will have an easier time running for and winning public office.

At this point, it’s important to define the term patriarchy as its used in this thesis. When speaking more generally in the previous section about society and the status quo, there was an understanding that what that means could vary wildly from society to society. Going further, there should be an understanding that for the vast majority of political and social systems that currently exist, what comprises “society” is often synonymous with a tradition of patriarchy. There are many definitions of the term that can be slanted in a variety of ways to reflect certain normative judgements based on who is supplying the definition, but a fairly neutral one that presents the best representation of the way this paper understands it comes from the Cambridge Dictionary. Patriarchy here is described as “a society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own advantage.”<sup>1</sup>

Underpinning the use of this term in the thesis is the understanding that in a patriarchy, men have an inherent incentive to present women as “less than” or being incapable of the same things as a male. For historically patriarchal societies having to slowly reckon with women gaining more power in politics over the past century or so, women who derive some portion of their identity (and therefore their power) from a relationship with a man via the context of marriage may appear less threatening to the established structure. Because there is still a distinctive male influence to a heterosexual married woman’s power via identity, it may be easier for more conservative voters to accept and vote for a candidate of this status because it fits more

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<sup>1</sup> (Patriarchy, 2024)

readily within the dogma of patriarchy as opposed to a single woman candidate, who is defined only by herself.

### **Analytical/Intersectional Lens**

Having established that the existence of the patriarchy may be a factor in how married women may be treated differently, it is prudent to bring in the important lens that intersectional identities may place on this topic, as alluded to by the inclusion of the term “heterosexual” in the previous section. Women, even the broad group of “married women,” are not universal in identity. Crucially, women in heterosexual marriages—that is, a partnership between a man and a woman—have a very different relationship with the patriarchal structures than women in a homosexual marriage. Incorporating intersectionality in relation to the topic of married women in politics presents a particular challenge, as there is very little specific research in the first place, and even less on women who fall outside of the “straight” label. Furthermore, in the few cases of non-heterosexual women in political power, it is difficult to separate whether differences in treatment derive specifically from non-heterosexual *married* status as opposed to broader questions about sexuality. Namely, it’s challenging to definitively say that the institution of marriage is a large enough contributing factor to the conversation around any politician who openly identifies as something other than heterosexual. Still, for purposes of this research question and its intersectional lens, it’s important to recognize that there is no one universal interpretation of marriage and there are many contributing factors that may affect the extent to which a woman is judged for this.

Race and Ethnicity are also notable intersectional lenses that may impact the degree to which a married woman is or is not judged. However, unlike the factor of sexuality, which plays into questions of what one does or does not consider to be marriage in the traditional sense, race and ethnicity may come in to play more in the reasons why a woman of a particular identity may choose to pursue marriage in the first place. It also may be a contributing factor depending on the makeup of the constituency where the woman of some given identity is running for office. If a woman comes belongs to a specific identity that places particular value in marriage, that identity will likely play a major factor in larger narratives about that woman's relationship status if the constituency where she's running has a large section of the population who shares that cultural, ethnic, or racial identity.

Going forward in this paper, this intersectional framework and the knowledge of how it may impact specific cases of women running for office will play into examination of the research that exists and discussion of the extent to which the thesis of this paper is able to be proved or disproved. At the same time, this is also done with the understanding that highly specific research individually delving into each of these intersectional factors, as well as research done through diverse methodology by diverse authors may still be the burden of future research.

### **Observations and Context of Existing Research**

As mentioned previously, the lack of extensive research on this topic makes a comprehensive analysis of many different studies covering a variety of different countries in an intersectional manner rather difficult. Since most research focuses on the conditions in the United States of America, that is what this section will focus on as well. In the US, the Census

Bureau reports that 46.4% of all adults are unmarried—nearly half the population, or 117.6 million people.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite the number of single or unmarried adults in the country, the very factor of marriage can significantly impact a person’s political activities. Research from Gallup indicates that married people lean toward identifying with the Republican party, and that more people within the Republican party are married by a wide margin (2-to-1).<sup>3</sup> Conversely, unmarried American adults are more likely to identify as independents or with the Democratic party.<sup>4</sup>

Related statistics show that there is also a significant gender gap in which party each sex leans towards—women lean Democratic significantly (41%) regardless of marital status.<sup>5</sup> Men are much more split (32% Republican, 31% Democratic).<sup>6</sup> So by inference, those on the left-leaning end of the political spectrum have a tendency to be either/both female and unmarried, although of course one is not indicative of the other. More Census reports from 2023 have determined that there are, on average, slightly more unmarried women than unmarried men in America today: 89.8 men to 100 women.<sup>7</sup>

While research has a fairly good perspective on how many people in the country are married and what this means for party affiliation at the very least, there is much less data available on the marital status of officials at every level of government, let alone broken down by gender. Clear-cut statistics are available for the number of women in high-level elected office currently (defined here as Congress, Statewide Elective Executive, and similar). In Congress,

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<sup>2</sup> (Bureau, n.d.)

<sup>3</sup> (Gallup, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> (Gallup, 2008)

<sup>5</sup> (Gallup, 2008)

<sup>6</sup> (Gallup, 2008)

<sup>7</sup> (Walker, n.d.)



151 women serve as Congresspeople or Senators—28.2% of all seats.<sup>8</sup> There are 99 Statewide Elective Executives who are female, as are 12 Governors.<sup>9</sup> In all these roles, more of the elected women are Democrats than Republicans.

While it's challenging to make assumptions without individually examining the marital status of every woman in this collective of roles, if the statistics about national levels of unmarried status hold true, as well as more women and unmarried people leaning towards the left, one can reasonably extrapolate that the known stats might be reflected in elected officials. If more female elected officials are Democrats, and more Democrats tend to be unmarried, then there is a potential frame of observations for looking at this subject.

Beyond basic statistics, specific research studies on particular questions about marriage and women's political life are harder to paint with a broad brush. The next few paragraphs will touch on a few specific studies of relevance. One of the most important studies in this topic area so far, although it does not deal directly with female elected officials, is an analysis done by Cambridge University on comments that women's organizations submitted to rule and policy makers from the years 2007 to 2013. After examining a little over a thousand comments via text analysis, the researchers found that despite rising levels of unmarried women in the population and as members of these organizations, the voices and narratives of married mothers were almost exclusively the contents of the submitted comments.<sup>10</sup> This is damning evidence to suggest that even among women's advocate groups, there is still a widespread belief that the "married mother" persona and role of a woman is a more compelling political advocate than an unmarried woman who is childless. The experiences of a woman who fits more neatly into traditional roles

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<sup>8</sup> (*Women in Elective Office 2024*, n.d.)

<sup>9</sup> (*Women in Elective Office 2024*, n.d.)

<sup>10</sup> (English, 2020)

are considered more valuable as a political action driver than those of a woman who cannot be defined in that same sense. If we expand this realization to the horizon of women running for office, it's little wonder that married women fit cleaner into the system if even female advocate groups prefer to default to defining women with traditional roles.

Another study published in *American Political Science Review* in 2018 examines and discusses why women seem to be underrepresented in politics despite making up about half of the population demographically by drawing on existing ideas and adding specific survey research to that understanding.<sup>11</sup> When the researchers looked at American voters' opinions in their surveys, they initially didn't find any evidence that people were outright dismissing female candidates or naturally gravitating towards male candidates. However, they did find that voters across the board preferred both male and female candidates who were married and had children.<sup>12</sup> The conclusion of this study was that because in most situations, the burden of managing a household in a marriage and raising the children fell to the female partner, these women have less available time to run for office and so choose not to, thus providing one possible explanation for their question of the underrepresentation of women in politics. For our purposes in this paper, another conclusion the researchers drew is also relevant: unmarried women without children may have more time to devote to political activity due to them not sharing the same obligations as married mothers, but since voters did not find the former traits as desirable, they have a harder time getting elected. This study provided quality evidence that there is a bias against single women in politics.

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<sup>11</sup> (TEELE et al., 2018)

<sup>12</sup> (TEELE et al., 2018)

Drawing in an intersectional lens once again into the scope of this topic, one paper in the journal *Social Politics* from 2010 on the evolution of gender politics in relation to the same-sex marriage debate has interesting implications for the question of marriage in relation to politics.<sup>13</sup> By examining, how same-sex partnerships were cast legally and socially against traditional heterosexual marriages, the author looks into the ways it forced reexamination of what exactly the institution of “marriage” was supposed to look like and contain. The broader conclusion is that the struggle for equal rights for LGBTQ+ Americans, particularly with marriage equality but not limited to that, actually had a “rising tide lifts all boats” effect for gender equality as well, including those in traditional heterosexual partnerships. By asking the question of what marriage was, it allowed heterosexual married women to gain more say in their own relationships and what they should contain. Speculatively, a political and social situation that would force society to look at the value system it imposes on relationships (such as implying that some relationship statuses are more valuable than others, as discussed earlier) and how single and unmarried people are treated, in the same manner that same-sex marriage demanded a reevaluation from society, could positively affect how all relationships are defined. If such a situation were to happen, it could positively improve the odds of single women being elected to political office.

Not all research completely supports the idea that putting emphasis on single women is a net positive for their political power and agency. One source that slightly negatively contends with the premise of this research paper’s thesis studies the 2004 presidential election and the “Sex in the City Voter” demographic bloc that was coined for that election cycle.<sup>14</sup> While the thesis suggests that because marriage is a “desired” social status, married women have an easier

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<sup>13</sup> (Smith, 2010)

<sup>14</sup> (Anderson & Stewart, 2005)

time getting elected, the results of this particular analysis argue that based on the connotations of the “Sex in the City” lifestyle—being young, well-off, and importantly single—it’s actually the single women who were in possession of the desirable social status in 2004. While the research doesn’t specifically delve into electability questions, it does conclude that characterizing single women in this way did not have a significant impact on these women’s political power or agency and did not end up affecting the outcome of the election.<sup>15</sup> Because the “Sex in the City Voter” classification was so heavily bent towards elevating white women, it was also highly non-intersectional. The erasure of women of color and depiction of single women as sexually promiscuous (like in the show from which the characterization gets its name) had an overall negative impact on women’s political affability in a larger societal sense, in the conclusion of these researchers.<sup>16</sup>

### **Points and Counterpoints Regarding Thesis Based on Research**

After examining studies and statistical data, there are both aspects that positively and negatively influence the outlook of this research paper’s thesis. Looking at the data, if more elected women are Democrats and more Democrats tend to be unmarried, that point suggests that there are other factors more important to voters than marriage when evaluating candidates at the end of the day and being unmarried does not matter as much as something like party affiliation. That would count negatively against the conclusion of the thesis. Additionally, the “Sex in the City Voter” example indicates that being single, depending on how it is framed, may not be important enough to validate large amounts of political agency for either voters or by extension

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<sup>15</sup> (Anderson & Stewart, 2005)

<sup>16</sup> (Anderson & Stewart, 2005)

candidates (Alternative framing of single women related to not defining them in terms of sexual behavior may yield different results, but such framing is unusual and rarely seen, let alone highly researched).

However, some of the other studies discussed did point clear fingers at a bias towards married women in both political desirability and ability to project a powerful political voice. Dominant stereotypes and narratives of women as wives and mothers still reign supreme in society, politics included. While non-heterosexual relationships add depth to the conversation of what it means to be a “wife and mother,” continuing to define the debate about what it means in society to be single around marriage as the default desirable state has negative impacts on moving past the greater stereotypes. Because the debate continues to be held in this manner, being unmarried continues to be “lesser,” lending credence to the thesis’ claim that married women find political success more smoothly.

### **Methodology and Challenges in Examining the Research Question**

Although there are points in both directions for the thesis, at this point in time there is no large body of conclusive (and intersectional) research that allows a full-bodied answer in favor of or in denial of the thesis. Lack of specific data and research makes a clear answer impossible. Much more research is needed in the future. Surveys, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, should be conducted asking about the opinions of voters on unmarried female candidates, as well as gathering interviews detailing the experiences of unmarried women running for office, would be greatly beneficial to this topic area. Additionally, research about women of differing

backgrounds and differing Races, Ethnicities, and Religions and their relationship with marriage in a political context will also be crucial.

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to examine the question of how single or unmarried women are treated differently than married women when running for public office, suggesting that because traditional societal structures allow for smoother integration of married women into the political sphere, their transition into political office would be more readily accepted than unmarried women. However, due to the complex structures of marriage, how intersectional factors relate to the institution, and lack of detailed research on this topic, this paper finds that answering the thesis definitively is challenging. There is an existing body of research, but much more needs to be done to add to it before key factors relating to unmarried women in politics can be identified, and eventually potentially addressed.

## **Reflection**

The preparation of this paper required both learned academic skills such as conducting research and applying an analytical framework, as well as acquired skills such as critical thinking and making inferences based on outside and tangential information. Logically, it makes sense that there would be some impact on the ability of women to participate in politics based on relationship status and how important marriage is to societal structure. Investigating that using

both logical assumptions and existing research required combining experiences from both my academic career and non-academic life. I think if we are to strive for an equitable world, we also need to apply a similar framework. It's important to have hard data and research to support the ideas we come up with and reflect the things we see in the world—academic and scientific studies are crucial to our understanding of the world around us and understanding how to face the problems we solve. However, these endeavors cannot be separated from the emotions and experiences of both our own lives and also those intimately affected by the disparities of our society. We cannot know what problems to look for answers to unless we know there is a problem. But creating an equitable world cannot happen if there is not a balance between facts and feelings.

A famous conservative commentator who will remain unnamed coined the catchphrase “Facts don't care about your feelings.” In my time at American University, I have furthered my belief that that sentiment couldn't be further than the truth. I've learned the historical and theoretical political basis of our current system, and it's become even more clear to me that what is or is not a “fact” is interpreted based on how people in power *felt* about that truth. The art of political communication is in a sense presenting the facts in a certain way to make someone feel a certain way about them. Whatever one's opinion about the efficacy of that, there is no denying that it has a major impact on the way our system works. What we feel to be true in a sense can become the truth.

While some might decry this as a death to normative “truth,” I would draw on my experiences in this class and at AU to take an alternative opinion. An equitable world is not the one we live in. However, if we believe we *should* live in an equitable world and use research to find out how to make that happen, it can *become* the truth. Acknowledging what a world of true

equality would look like is the first step in making it happen. The world does not change without a will and a wish to make it change.

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