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Exploiting Femininity in Politics

Gendered stereotypes undoubtedly influence the political presence of women in Congress, commonly misconstruing female politicians in the public sphere as too passive, overly emotional, and excessively irrational. However, these same stereotypes depict women in the private sphere as protective nation-mothers, altruistic caregivers, and nurturing partners. Women in Congress navigate this double bind to varying degrees of success in US politics, attempting to balance autonomous strength with benevolent softness. To this point, female politicians such as Maryland Congresswoman Donna Edwards currently seeking to address women's rights, low-income relief, and Social Security legislation embrace gender stereotypes of femininity and motherhood that allow women to efficaciously represent interests of individuals in feminized domains of democratic politics.

First, women in American politics pursuing protective legislation for women's rights emphasize motherhood archetypes in order to align themselves with the familial private sphere and portray themselves as competent representatives of women's issues within public sphere politics. Primarily, patriarchy understands women as necessary "to produce and nurture life" and, therefore, as intrinsically tied to family life (Rajan 95). That is to say, women are defined by their biological fertility and, as a result, are often suppressed to the private sphere to fulfill motherhood and homemaker roles. In particular, Donna Edwards presents herself as "a single mother...putting her son through school," allowing voters to view her "as more compassionate [and] caring, allowing her to "better understand the average [woman's] plight" (*donnaedwardsforsenate.com*; Carlin & Winfrey 328). Essentially, Edwards allows herself to be

characterized through stereotypes of motherhood that illustrate her as family-oriented and sympathetic to the collective narrative of women. Paralleling her own experiences with those of other women, especially mothers, Edwards achieves both the support of female voting blocs and prominence in public politics as a voice for women's issues. At the crux, Edwards exploits stereotypes surrounding her image as a mother and homemaker to align herself with voters intimately involved in women's rights by appealing to women affected by familial aspects of the private sphere.

Continuing, female politicians cite their alignment with the private sphere through stereotypes of motherhood as indicative of their capacity to influence legislation affecting women's rights, demonstrating the impact of gendered identities on political efficacy. For example, Donna Edwards presents herself through motherhood archetypes in order to be perceived as an authoritative figure in women's rights politics. As a descriptive representative for women, Edwards has supported the Employment Discrimination Law Amendments, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, and the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 (*votesmart.org*). Even further, she, along with 179 other Democrats, opposed the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act which intends to prohibit abortions "after an unborn child is determined to be 20 weeks or older" (*ballotpedia.com*). Supporting these progressive pieces of legislation protecting the economic and personal rights of women as a marginalized voting bloc has allowed Edwards to generate constituent support as a descriptive representative and, ultimately, augment her political influence. Centrally, Edwards emphasizes her position as a mother and feminine woman to successfully advocate for female voters. As a result, women both inside and outside Edwards' District 4 domain financially support Edwards' political efforts to increase her political clout, public visibility, and persuasive agency. In essence, Edwards', like

other female politicians, uses stereotypes of femininity and motherhood to appeal to female voting blocs in order to advance their political efficacy within American politics.

Second, female politicians deliberately evoke images of women's economic marginalization by patriarchy, effectively appealing to impoverished, low-income workers and using gendered stereotypes to characterize themselves as suitable descriptive representatives for impoverished Americans. Essentially, women have "always made less money [than men], regardless of universit[y] and...degree" attainment, highlighting the inaccessibility of unhindered economic prosperity under patriarchal society as a common denominator between women and disadvantaged workers (Carroll 7). Society fundamentally treats financial insecurity as a feminine demonstration of dependence, resulting in the feminization of low-income workers. In fact, "under some conditions the stereotypes of low-status groups parallel stereotypes of women. The ascription of 'feminine' communal traits to low-status groups occur when there are long-standing relations of stable status inequality between groups" such as those experienced by Donna Edwards who shares her narrative as a divorced, single African American woman raising a child, paying back student loans, and working full-time to overcome economic oppression (Glick & Fiske 380). Donna Edwards, like other female politicians, allows herself to be stereotyped as a victim of financial vulnerability to find common ground with low-income workers suffering from similar financial insecurities. In other words, female politicians expose personal finance deficiencies in order to capitalize on gendered stereotypes regarding economic success and, as a result, appeal to impoverished voting blocs in American politics.

Moreover, women in American politics adopt stereotypes of feminized financial insecurity that allow them to engage with disadvantaged working Americans, effectively augmenting their political agency when pursuing poverty-relief legislation. Donna Edwards

exemplifies this strategy by describing herself as a single woman “struggling to make ends meet [as she pays] back student loans” while upholding the Restoration of \$20.5 Billion in Appropriates for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the Extension of Certain Unemployment Benefits, and the Extending Federal Emergency Unemployment Benefits bills during her service as a Maryland Congresswoman (*donnaedwardsforsenate.com*; *votesmart.org*). Additionally, “Edwards co-sponsored the American Jobs Act,” legislation that “includes investing \$625 million in Maryland infrastructure projects that would create 8,100 jobs” for previously unemployed or underpaid individuals (*ballotpedia.com*). Centrally, Donna Edwards supports legislation protecting impoverished Americans from destitution to depict herself as a benevolent, relatable, descriptive representative working on behalf of marginalized workers feminized by patriarchal stereotypes. Contrary to male economic fortitude within patriarchal society, Edwards allows herself to be stereotyped as a victim of economic timidity innate to femininity. As a result, voters perceive Edwards as equally interested in supporting legislation that protects low-income and recently unemployed workers due to her own experiences with financial distress, characterizing her as a competent descriptive representative for disadvantaged Americans. That is to say, Edwards’ exploitation of stereotypes victimizing financially insecure women allows her to expand her constituent base and, with the aid of an expanded support system, generate increased agency within the public sphere of politics. Specifically, Edwards demonstrates a larger trend among female politicians involving the employment of gendered stereotypes in appealing to marginalized voting blocs. Fundamentally, women in American politics take advantage of gender-based perceptions of women as financially inept victims in order to relate to economically disadvantaged Americans seeking legislative help to achieve increased political efficacy in welfare and poverty-relief domains of politics.

Third, female politicians exploit gender stereotypes casting women as caretakers in order to engage with aging voter blocs affected by Social Security legislation and, ultimately, gain political efficacy in the public sphere of politics through the support of voters in the private sphere. As a result of gendered stereotypes feminizing motherhood and nursing roles, “women are perceived as more empathetic...trustworthy, honest, and compassionate than their male counterparts [and] because of these trait perceptions...women are perceived as better able to handle ‘compassion’ issues like...health care” and medical management, especially for elderly individuals physically restricted to the private sphere of the home (Ditonto, Hamilton, & Redlawsk 338). Drawing upon images of women as protective figures, female politicians exhibit empathy, citing personal family experiences with complications from illness and aging to imply competence as protectors of welfare programs that advocate for the voiceless. That is to say, politicians like Donna Edwards demonstrate feminine, empathetic humanity before masculine, callous intensity, allowing them to more intimately appreciate and represent individuals of repressed agency including the disabled, retired, and severely ill. Female politicians successfully engage with disadvantaged, aging individuals relying on social welfare by embracing stereotypes of femininity that recast women through archetypes motherhood as descriptive representatives capable of protecting and healing the needy.

Furthermore, female politicians employ stereotypes addressing women as caregivers and healers to gain political influence through descriptive representation of aging voter blocs in Social Security legislation. Through her support of the Health Care Reconciliation Act, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the Health Care and Insurance Law Amendments, and the Medicare Bill, Donna Edwards has presented herself as a pioneer of lawmaking in the healthcare domain, characterizing herself as deeply attuned to the needs of aging citizens

(*votesmart.org*). Continuing, Edwards asserts that she “was an original cosponsor of the Affordable Care Act and because of [her] leadership through the process, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi honored [her] with being one of only a few members to serve as Speaker Pro Tempore on the day of the final vote” (*ballotpedia.com*). That is to say, Donna Edwards casts herself as an exceptionally progressive representative for individuals marginalized by old age and sickness under patriarchal institutions when compared to her political male counterparts. Assuming a leading, highly visible role in Social Security legislation politics allows Edwards’ to augment her political efficacy through the bolstering support of the populous, aging Baby Boomer generation. Essentially, Edwards’ exploits gendered stereotypes recharacterizing her femininity as indicative of an intrinsic competence for healthcare proficiency to expand her constituent support to include aging populations financially dependent on Social Security. At the crux, a growing constituent base permits growing political authority. Thus, female politicians such as Donna Edwards take advantage of gendered stereotypes in healthcare domains in order to earn recognition as descriptive representatives for the aging populous and, resultantly, broaden their spheres of political influence. Most notably, employing stereotypes of femininity in caregiving allows women in American politics to demonstrate significant political voice and visibility through legislative work in Social Security domains in which women, more effectively than men, engage with voters experiencing illness and old age.

In conclusion, Maryland Congresswoman Donna Edwards epitomizes the strategic exploitation of gender stereotypes to gain political agency in women’s rights, low-income relief, and Social Security domains. By employing stereotypically feminine characteristics of womanhood, compassion, financial victimization, and healing, female politicians appeal more effectively than male politicians to voting blocs comprised of voiceless women, disadvantaged

Americans, and aging citizens. As a result, embracing positive stereotypes paralleling the interests of women with marginalized groups allows female politicians like Donna Edwards to expand their pool of constituent support and substantially increase their agency within the public sphere of political discourse. Gendered stereotypes undoubtedly influence public perceptions of women in the US Congress, however the constructive manipulation of femininity standards allows women in American politics to act as descriptive representatives for marginalized and voiceless populations, bolstering women's overall political agency.

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