

What Power Structures Mean for Women and the Status Quo

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Latin America, despite its reputation for a *machismo* that transcends social and economic sectors, has an unprecedented number of women that have been elected to the highest office of their respective country, especially relative to any other region of the world. When women do get elected to office, however, often they are not given proper credit for their own accomplishments. Instead, their successes are attributed to the men that came before them and endorsed their campaigns, in effect, promoting the idea that these women have been gifted the presidency instead of earning it. However, to claim that women are gifted the presidency by their male predecessors is to dismiss the dependence that male politicians have on the same power structures that are prevalent throughout the region. In fact, it is when female politicians are successfully able to coopt traditionally masculine spaces or processes that they find their own success at the highest levels. Moreover, the manner in which the cooption occurs is intrinsically linked to their ability to challenge certain aspects of the status quo.

The Machismo Paradox

Since the start of the century, four Latin American women have been elected by popular vote to the presidency. These women are Michelle Bachelet of Chile, Dilma Rousseff of Brazil, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina, and Laura Chinchilla of Costa Rica. Despite the fact that they all served on the national level immediately before becoming president, their careers represent two distinct paths to breaking into the public sphere. On the one hand, there is cooption of traditionally masculine spaces through the accumulation of security credentials. This is embodied by Bachelet who was trained in military strategy both in the United States and Chile, and Rousseff who entered the public eye when she was tried for subversion as a guerrilla fighter. On the other hand, there is cooption of traditionally masculine processes through the act of successfully campaigning for national office before the presidency. This is embodied by Kirchner who was elected to national office as a representative in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, meanwhile Chinchilla campaigned as a vice presidential candidate on Óscar Arias' successful presidential bid. At the intersection of both is the case of Secretary Clinton, who represents the transformation of a candidate who coopted the process of campaigning as a precursor to her first presidential bid, and later coopted security politics for her second, a shift that had a clear impact on the rhetoric of her campaign. Irrespective of their ultimate successes, however, Nikhil Kumar argues in

“The Machismo Paradox: Latin America’s Struggles with Feminism and Patriarchy” that “contradictory heritages of feminism and patriarchy have determined [their] paths...[and] their rise to power — however groundbreaking — still relied on support from the male establishment.”ⁱ Given the fact that each of these women shared a dependence on receiving *male* support, it is important to understand the path these women took to power and how it relates to their ability to challenge the status quo.

The Politics of Succession

As would be true of any politician, the rise to power of these women was undoubtedly made easier by the wide support their parties were experiencing across the political sphere. When Bachelet was elected to the presidency in 2005, she came into office with a coalition representing over half of both houses of government.ⁱⁱ Additionally, Rouseff and Kirchner both entered their first terms with clear legislative majorities in both houses. Meanwhile Chinchilla, despite winning the first round of her election outright, fell short of a similar legislative majority. As such, it can be perceived that the actual candidate up for election was not a factor, and any generic candidate from that party would have had equal success in the presidential election. So how did these women get to be the candidates for their parties?

As women, their political lives and policy decisions tend to be examined through the perspective of feminism and their relative embrace or rejection of traits and policies associated with the movement. In turn, their need to negotiate their relationship to public and institutional spaces is inherently influenced by the perception of whether or not they become the “women’s candidate” or focus too much on policy that deals with “women’s issues”. Therefore, a woman who is perceived as caring too much about these issues—or is concerned about that possibility—inherently is going to be reluctant to challenge the status quo in this respect when planning the agenda of their potential administration. Moreover, not all paths to the presidency afford them with the same latitude to act. As it happens, those who have earned their “masculine” credentials through a security background are able to more aggressively challenge dominant power structures because this background becomes something intrinsic about them as a person. Conversely, women who have earned their credentials through the campaign process must deal with the reality that perception of their “masculinity”, and thus qualification, is inherently relative to the person they are campaigning against.

To better understand this relationship, one needs to look no further than how each of these women have handled balancing policies on the campaign trail and their eventual administration. One of the best examples of this policy-making approach is abortion, given that many of these countries had policies in place that either completely restricted abortion or permitted the procedure only in limited circumstances such as sexual violence, incest, or if continuation of the pregnancy would pose a risk to the health or life of the mother. It is telling that the way these women have approached their administration’s policy to abortion can be grouped along the same lines as how these women gained legitimacy from dominant power structures. Both Bachelet and Rouseff who possess this qualification as something intrinsic about them found the latitude to loosen restrictions on abortions in their country, whereas both Kirchner and Chinchilla

who possess relative masculinity doubled down on opposition to abortion through their terms.

The Need for a Source of Masculine Legitimacy

Both Bachelet and Rousseff share a similar history from their youths that brought them into the political sphere through the security politics field. Bachelet, during the rule of Pinochet, was accused of conspiring against the regime as a student activist. After being taken and tortured alongside her mother by the secret police, they were able to flee to exile in Australia.ⁱⁱⁱ This experience motivated her to receive training in military strategy, and it was public visibility as Minister of Defense that gave her the popularity to run for the presidency. Meanwhile, the experience of Dilma Rousseff under the military regime that took control of the Brazilian government in 1964 led to her involvement with Marxist guerrilla groups.^{iv} After her arrest in 1970, a photo of her trial before military officials became widely disseminated and she was projected into the national spotlight as the movement's "Joan of Arc".^v As a product of entering the public sphere in such a manner, both of these women had coopted a masculine space and made it a part of their personal identity.

Having done so, both Bachelet and Rousseff could move forward with women-centric policies without fear of their gender overshadowing their candidacy. In the case of Chile, a total ban on abortion has been in effect since 1989 when General Augusto Pinochet reaffirmed the Catholic Church as a major player in the political sphere. Although the Church still remains influential, in January 2015 Bachelet introduced a bill to Congress that sought to reverse this ban. It passed the first hurdle of being approved by the Chamber of Deputies in a 66 to 44 vote early this year.^{vi} While the procedure would only be legal in a limited number of situations, it would be the first step at allowing access to legal services for a country with one of the highest rates of abortion in Latin America.^{vii} This would bring Chile's abortion laws in line with those of Brazil, another nation with a strong Catholic tradition. Although the political climate of Brazil is currently much more vocally against abortion than Chile, Rousseff sought to legalize access to abortion-related services, signing into law a bill granting access to emergency contraceptives ("morning-after pills") in the state-run public health system.^{viii} Bachelet also created access to emergency contraceptives during her first term as president in 2006.^{ix}

While people commonly perceive security politics to exhibit masculine traits of leadership, many fail to see how political campaigning requires these same traits. The modern presidential campaign, which has the candidate traveling around a country, making policy speeches, and hosting motivational rallies, is designed to give candidates the opportunity to appear outwardly as leaders. As such, it is no surprise that "people associate leadership with agentic traits – conventionally masculine descriptors such as 'assertive,' 'forceful,' 'dominant,' and 'competitive'...and [agentic traits] can be manifested through behaviors such as self-promotion, expressions of ambition, and visual dominance."^x Therefore, campaigning must be viewed not only as a sequence of events, but as a processes tied to the public displaying of masculine traits. Moreover, it must also be noted that this is inherently a *relative* process. Masculinity in the campaign

world is not an absolute—for a candidate, judgment of their masculinity stands relative to the masculinity of the other candidates.

As it impacts a female candidate, this link between campaigning and masculinity can be a difficult barrier to overcome. Not only do women have to display these qualities, but they must avoid a double bind. What this means, is that “[when] they conform to feminine stereotypes and behave communally, they are perceived as weak leaders. When they conform to stereotypes of ‘good leaders’ and behave agentically, they are penalized for bucking gender norms.”^{xi} Given not only this, but that for many “masculinity” is not something inherent to their image as a public figure, female candidates lack the latitude to freely challenge dominant power structures for fear of being dismissed by voters on the basis of their gender. For women such as Kirchner and Chinchilla, the masculinity that they possessed by the time they entered the political sphere as presidential candidates was fragile given it existed on the basis of their successful campaigns in the past. For Kirchner, this came from her election once to the Chamber of Deputies and twice to the Argentine Senate.^{xii} For Laura Chinchilla, she campaigned for, and was elected to, national office first as a deputy in the National Assembly and then as one of President Óscar Arias’ vice presidents.^{xiii} Ultimately, what matters is that there exists a fundamental difference between these two women and Bachelet and Rouseff, given Kirchner and Chinchilla needed to continue to prove their masculinity on the campaign trail.

The real world implications of this gender dynamic are very visible when it comes to the way that both of their campaigns and policies have been critiqued. The *New York Times* wrote shortly after the election of Kirchner that Kirchner’s need to minimize her gender meant that she “barely mentioned the subject until election night, when she said she felt ‘an enormous responsibility to her gender.’”^{xiv} Moreover, some accuse Kirchner of exploiting *machismo* during her campaign, saying that she “has a predilection for short skirts, kinky boots, and immaculately coiffed hair—but she has never expressed interest in advancing issues like equal pay.”^{xv} Likewise, Laura Chinchilla has not been the feminist icon that many expect of women in leadership. An analysis by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), notes that Chinchilla “has never taken on a clear and firm commitment to the fight for equality between women and men...or for the elimination of conditions that generate and reproduce gender oppression.”^{xvi} For both, these criticisms of their rhetoric on the campaign trail hold true for the policies they promoted once in office.

As presidents, both Kirchner and Chinchilla have publicly taken anti-abortion stances. Kirchner is known to have said, “I have always defined myself as being against abortion” days before her first presidential election in a national radio address.^{xvii} Similarly, as President-elect, Chinchilla remarked during an interview, “During my government, we will not support any law that favors abortion.”^{xviii} Nevertheless, public rhetoric against a policy does not necessarily translate to genuine, internal opposition to it. Given a closer look at Kirchner, there is reason to suspect a tension between her public rhetoric and private thoughts. In reality, during her tenure people believed that “perhaps [she was] just trying to placate the Catholic Church. Conservatives, on the other hand, [charged] her with holding a ‘pro-life’ placard over the front door while hoping to sneak abortion in through the back door.”^{xix}

Hillary Clinton: A Comparative Case

In 2008, Hillary Clinton set out to do what no woman had done before: become the first female presidential nominee of a major political party in the United States. Not only would this be a historic first, but her nomination would have come at the same time that over 50 percent of the population in Latin America lived in a country with a female president. However, Hillary Clinton did not market herself as the woman's candidate, nor the standard bearer of the feminist movement that so many expected her to be. As her campaign wound down, *Slate*, like many other outlets, remarked: "Her problem wasn't that she was a feminist. Her problem was that she wasn't feminist enough."^{xx} If people perceived this to be true, it is because Clinton – who by then had only held elected office as a senator – had to stay away from women's issues given the source of her masculinity was the fragile relative masculinity from her senate campaigns. Exemplifying this, when speaking about abortion, Clinton remarked, "I think abortion should remain legal, but it needs to be safe and rare. And I have spent many years now, as a private citizen, as first lady, and now as senator, trying to make it rare, trying to create the conditions where women had other choices."^{xxi} While this is still a pro-choice stance, it is clear that Clinton was trying to create distance between herself and her support for a women's right to have an abortion; given her source of masculinity, she felt she lacked the latitude to challenge the dominant power structures at play.

Her statements and actions throughout her first primary campaign suggest that Clinton had a fundamental understanding of this dynamic. Specifically, Clinton understood that running for President of the United States would require coopting masculine sources of power and she made her moves early. After becoming Senator in 2000, she worked to have herself assigned to the Senate Armed Services Committee, an assignment that she believed would give her national security credentials in a way that her assignment to the Senate Committee on the Budget could never. Underscoring the Clinton campaign's belief in the impact of her experience is the infamous [3 a.m. telephone ad](#) she released against then-Senator Obama, touting the need for someone in the White House with national security credentials— credentials that she claimed to have. Ultimately, however, having security politics experience does not necessarily mean that the candidate can leverage that into a part of their identity. The question remains, "to what extent do men— and women— respond positively to *women* candidates who display traditionally 'masculine' characteristics in questions of foreign policy and the use of force?"^{xxii} As demonstrated by the relative success of Bachelet and Rouseff compared to Clinton, the actual response is still uncertain. Simply because a candidate has coopted the space to some degree, that does not mean they have done so sufficiently.

That all changed when President Obama made the decision to appoint her as Secretary of State during his first term. In this position, like Bachelet and Rouseff, Secretary Clinton was able to gain credible national defense experience. Her public role in decisions such as the one to kill Osama bin Laden or intervene in Libya brought that experience onto the national stage well before she launched her second campaign for president in 2015. In this campaign, having coopted the space of security politics and made its masculinity a permanent part of her identity, Secretary Clinton now had the latitude to become the woman's candidate and embrace the history behind her

campaign. Not only did she embrace a more openly pro-choice agenda, declaring that she will defend women's health rights "not just in principle, but in practice", she also embraced the historic nature of her candidacy in a way that only a woman who has been able to lay claim to traditionally masculine spaces is able to do.^{xxiii}

The first demonstration of this was in response to Donald Trump's comment during the primary campaigns that she was playing the "woman card". Rather than dismiss the role of gender as she might have during her 2008 campaign, Clinton said at a rally in Pennsylvania, "if fighting for women's healthcare and paid family leave and equal pay is playing the woman card, then deal me in" – launching what was then the biggest fundraising drive of her campaign.^{xxiv} This sentiment then came full circle during the introductory video to Clinton's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention. In the video, aptly titled "History Made", she gives a history of the women's rights movement in the country, beginning with the women of Seneca Falls in 1848, tracing through the advances of Gloria Steinem and Sandra Day O'Connor, to her own remarks in Beijing advocating for women's rights as human rights.^{xxv} The difference between 2008 Clinton and 2016 Clinton could not be more clear, and her tenure as Secretary of State is the one tangible experience that sets her two primary campaigns apart.

Conclusion

Although she has yet to win the presidency, the evolution of Hillary Clinton—the presidential candidate—has exemplified the reality of the challenges faced by women such as Bachelet, Rouseff, Kirchner and Chinchilla. In order to win elected office, all five of these women have encountered the challenge of being true to their gender while figuring out how to take advantage of traditionally masculine spaces and processes. For some, their involvement with security politics provided them with the opportunity to permanently associate their political identities with the masculine traits inherent to the field. For others, their cooption of the masculine process of campaigning afforded them enough temporary masculinity to enter the stage as presidential candidates, at which point they were required to assert their masculinity in the face of their male opposition. Regardless of the path that the candidate chose to follow, the narrative remains the same: these women had to find ways to make themselves more masculine, or more in line with traits representative of the idealized male leader. None of these women were able to establish themselves as presidential candidates without having previously done so. Moreover, their approach to doing so inherently impacted their ability to challenge dominant power structures and therefore their ability to govern. As long as we expect women to act or think like men in order to be legitimate contenders for president, there still remains genuine barriers to the success of women in leadership positions at every level.

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