Trump vs Clinton is a chance to think more clearly about gender and leadership

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With a woman closer than ever to the presidency of the United States, the 2016 campaign has become a fierce arena for negotiating gender perceptions – and it’s been a revealing spectacle, especially in the campaign’s final months and weeks.

Trump’s now notorious lament that Clinton has neither the right “look” nor the “stamina” of a leader implies not only that she isn’t masculine enough to be president, but in fact not male enough. Such gender-charged statements demonstrate the cultural norm that leadership is considered primarily – if not exclusively – a male role.

This is not speculation; statistics illustrate how gender bias affects leader appointments across sectors. A gender gap in positions of power endures in business and politics, despite evidence that the gender of individual corporate officers makes no difference to the financial performance of major companies, but including women on boards improves performance, and that leaders’ individual behaviour differs only minimally between the genders.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are more than three times as many women with college degrees in the labor force as there were in 1970 – and yet the number of women in the most
powerful (and top earning) executive ranks has remained low. According to the non-profit organisation Catalyst, in 2011 women occupied only 14.1% of executive officer positions, 16.1% of board seats, 7.6% of top earner positions and 3.8% of CEO positions.

The picture is marginally better but nonetheless similar when it comes to political leadership. Women currently hold 20 of 100 seats in the US Senate, and 84 of 435 in the US House of Representatives. The disproportional underrepresentation of women in these ranks is further evidence of the enduring power of unconscious gender bias and an unwillingness among the wider public to acknowledge the systemic nature of the glass ceiling.

Indeed the Clinton–Trump election has forced the issue of gender in leadership and stirred up heated opinions. Many onlookers are now questioning why these symbolic systems endure.

**Mistaken assumptions**

One rather oversimplified way to explore this question is to look at the traits attributed to women and men through gender socialization. An example is the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), a tool developed by Sandra Lipsitz Bem in the 1970s to measure “androgyny”, or the balance of masculine and female traits. It assesses subjects against traits classified as stereotypically feminine, masculine, or neutral. While the BSRI has some serious theoretical and psychometric flaws, it’s still widely used to measure gender traits as defined by our predominant cultural expectations.

Traits the BSRI assigns as measures of masculinity help demonstrate how the choices in language used by the media in fact reinforces gender expectations, and how this sort of talk helps perpetuate the gendered perceptions of leadership that keep women lower down the ladder.

Two of the items the BSRI assigns to the masculine category are “acts as a leader” and “has leadership abilities”. Further items include traits such as ambitious, assertive, autonomous, bold, charismatic, competitive, confident, decisive, independent, influential and resilient.
Any female candidate who adopts these qualities would be breaching gender expectations, meaning she may be widely rejected as a leader, even though her behaviour matched expectations of good leadership. Her deviating from traditionally feminine attributed behavior means voters might well be subconsciously put off by the incongruence.

Conversely, any candidate (female or male) described with BSRI items associated with femininity – affectionate, childlike, gentle, gullible, romantic, sensitive, shy, or yielding – would certainly not fit the trait expectations of a president.

Clinton has long been attacked for being not feminine enough (unlikeable) and simultaneously too feminine (shrill), not masculine enough (too cautious) and simultaneously too masculine (provocative). Trump has been criticised mainly for his supposedly hypermasculine qualities – for being ruthless, bullying, dastardly, macho, even misogynistic.

But encouragingly, the potential for change is there.

In the more than 100 interviews they cite in their book The Athena Doctrine, John Gerzema and Michael D’Antonio explored which socially desirable traits of femininity and masculinity were most strongly associated with leadership.

They found that ten of the top leadership-related attributes were considered feminine, six masculine, and one gender-neutral. On the feminine side, a leader should be, for example: expressive, reasonable, loyal, flexible, patient, passionate, empathetic, and selfless, and on the masculine side decisive, resilient, analytic, independent, aggressive, proud.

**Both womanly and manly**

One of the major problems with these trait approaches is the implication that, once attributes have been labelled as either feminine or masculine, they become mutually exclusive. This is wrongheaded; the point should be that if expectations of female and male leaders are really going to change, both women and men need to develop a balanced approach to leadership, one that combines and integrates “feminine” and “masculine” behaviors.

In my own research, I talk about to the phenomenon of “gender-integrative leadership behaviour”. My theory is that leaders who can authentically integrate traditionally “feminine” and “masculine” leader behaviors are perceived as the most competent and desirable, regardless of their gender. Communication expert Sabrina Pasztor agrees, arguing that effective leaders must switch between feminine and masculine styles of communicating.

Some of the reporting of Clinton and Trump’s debate performances shows this “blending” of attributes at work. Much of the media praised Clinton for her “appropriately feminine” comportment: patience, empathy, composure. But she also won some praise for displaying some “masculine” traits – she was “resilient”, “brave”, “tough and disciplined”.

The language used to evaluate Trump, on the other hand, tended far more towards the masculine end of the spectrum, with sympathetic reviews lauding his boldness and assertiveness – and critical ones...
condemning his aggressiveness.

Trump with his over-the-top masculinity and over-emotionality (overly feminine!) has given a voice to many voters’ deep anger at their presumably corrupt, entrenched government. Clinton, with her tempered femininity, has attempted to meld the caring reasoning of an involved government with the assertive strength of a world power. Although she has received scant credit and still faces quite damning accusations, this integrative style will serve her well should she be elected, whereas Trump’s hypermasculine style could alienate him.

Whichever candidate becomes the most powerful person in the world will inevitably be measured against predominantly masculine expectations. But there are also signs that we are slowly starting to accept the idea that leadership is not the automatic province of men – and that some traditionally “feminine” qualities might make our leaders a lot better.
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