

# Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought

---

Volume 11  
Issue 1 *Women and Politics: Obstacles &  
Opportunities*

Article 5

---

9-13-2019

## Han, Lori Cox and Heldman, Caroline. Women, Power, and Politics: The Fight for Gender Equality in the U.S.

Alicia G. Vaandering  
Salve Regina University, [alicia.vaandering@salve.edu](mailto:alicia.vaandering@salve.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift>



Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vaandering, Alicia G. (2019) "Han, Lori Cox and Heldman, Caroline. Women, Power, and Politics: The Fight for Gender Equality in the U.S.," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*. Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift/vol11/iss1/5>

### Rights Statement



In Copyright - Educational Use Permitted. URI: <http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/InC-EDU/1.0/>

This Item is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. In addition, no permission is required from the rights-holder(s) for educational uses. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s).

**Han, Lori Cox and Caroline Heldman. *Women, Power, and Politics: The Fight for Gender Equality in the United States***

New York: Oxford University Press. 2018. ISBN 9780190620240

*Reviewed by Alicia G. Vaandering, Education and Instructional Design Librarian, Salve Regina University.*

From the outcome of the 2016 presidential election to the recent rise of the #MeToo Movement, the relationship between gender and politics in the United States has been widely discussed and debated in the public, academic, and private spheres. The release of *Women, Power, and Politics: The Fight for Gender Equality in the United States* is appropriately timed to provide a richly detailed history of this relationship. With their combined expertise in political science, media and communication, gender studies, and race studies, authors Lori Cox Han and Caroline Heldman apply a wide scope in their investigation of gender and politics, asking questions that range from how women in political leadership roles are portrayed and perceived to how gender impacts the way average citizens engage in politics. They endeavor to answer these questions by providing two primary focal points for understanding the dynamics of this complicated relationship: (1) the experiences and impact of women engaged in political efforts since the founding of the country, with particularly detailed coverage of the period following the beginning of the suffrage movement with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, and (2) the way that politics have shaped experiences and daily lives of women in the United States.

Han and Heldman take an intersectional approach to their study. In their introduction, they argue that it is their inclusion of race, income, and sexuality as key factors to understanding gender and politics that makes their research unique to the field of political science. This approach does provide a much-needed nuanced discussion of how gender impacts political power and how that power, in turn, shapes the daily lives of American men and women in gendered ways. The authors' adherence to an intersectional approach is visible in the inclusion

of diverse perspectives and evidence provided as well as in a series of profiles that highlight leaders and activists in the women's movement, either individually or as part of a group. These twenty profiles highlight three multicultural groups (e.g. women presidential candidates), seven women of color, and ten white women. Two profiles focus on members of the LGBTQIA community.

The first four chapters of *Women, Power, and Politics* serve as somewhat of a crash course in gender studies aimed at readers who are new to this field. Han and Heldman provide an enticing introduction to key topics by introducing each chapter with recent examples from current political, social, and cultural interactions that clearly illustrate the relevancy of these conversations. The authors use these early chapters to detail the major events and players in women's history and the women's rights movement in the United States, to identify the ten main branches of feminism, and to explore various points of backlash against the women's rights movement. The fourth chapter, which focuses on the media's portrayals of women, will undoubtedly pique the interest of millennial readers with its diverse range of pop culture references. Rather than distract, however, these examples encourage students to critically analyze and question the images and information they encounter daily as output from American entertainment and media industries.

Han and Heldman proceed to examine the experiences of women as they campaign for and fill political offices, from a general overview of women as political candidates to their roles as legislators, executive leaders, and judiciaries on national and state levels. Utilizing resources from research institutes, academic presses, and popular news sources, the authors argue that, despite the struggle to depict the unique strengths of women candidates in a manner that avoids reducing them to gender stereotypes within political discourse, women are just as likely as their

male peers to be elected when they do run for office. The problem of underrepresentation, then, is that less women run for office due to a wide variety of factors that range from societal expectations for women to be the primary caretaker in the home to the lack of female political role models for women as they grow from childhood to adulthood. Han and Heldman convincingly contend that one of the most significant barriers for women reaching executive offices, then, is the absence of women in the appropriate leadership positions in government that could put them on track for executive roles like the presidency.

The final three chapters of *Women, Power, and Politics* explores the history of public policies that impact women's personal, professional, and public lives. Despite the importance of this content to a comprehensive exploration of the relationship between gender and politics, this last section is arguably the weakest of the book. While Han and Heldman have incorporated an abundance of statistics and evidence to illustrate how public policy impacts the daily lives of American women, their discussions lack the deeper analysis and contextualization that were amply provided in earlier chapters. Instead of finding an overarching narrative that ties this content together and links it to the rest of the book, the reader instead experiences wave after wave of statistics, legal cases, and policies. These loose ends are particularly unsatisfying as the authors have not provided a chapter to conclude their monograph. An effective conclusion could have clarified how the final chapters relate to and expand upon earlier sections of the book as well as given readers a sense of what might come next in either the relationship of gender and politics or the scholarship that reflects upon that relationship.

In addition to the underlying problems in the last chapters of *Women, Power, and Politics*, there is a final problem that should be noted, although it certainly falls outside Han and Heldman's control. This is the problem of timing. Han and Heldman have endeavored to

provide a current, comprehensive overview of the complicated relationship between gender and politics in the wake of Donald Trump's defeat of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election. However, *Women, Power, and Politics* was published a year before the #MeToo movement, a movement that has powerfully reshaped the dynamics and discourse surrounding this relationship. While it is impossible to know what the long-lasting impact of the #MeToo movement will be, current readers of Han and Heldman's work will undoubtedly feel as though a significant piece of the discussion is missing.

Despite these shortcomings, *Women, Power, and Politics* provides an excellent introduction to the study of gender and politics. While the average interested reader will find it to be an effective immersion into gender and political issues, its organization and content also make it an ideal textbook for introductory undergraduate courses in gender studies and political science. Each chapter offers a conclusion that highlights key points and outcomes, a detailed summary of the chapter, study/discussion questions that could be used as essay prompts or in classroom discussion, case studies that highlight and encourage students to engage with specific complex examples, and additional resources. With these special features, it is clear that the authors have developed an in-depth introduction that serves as a springboard into gender and political issues.