

9-13-2019

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Elisa (2019) "Parkham-Payne, Wanda. The Intersection of Race and Gender in National Politics," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift/vol11/iss1/6>

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Parham-Payne, Wanda V. *The Intersection of Race and Gender in National Politics*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. ISBN: 9781498513067

Reviewed by Elisa Miller, Associate Professor, Department of History and Gender and Women's Studies Program, Rhode Island College.

Wanda V. Parham-Payne, a sociologist at Prince George's Community College, has written a timely book about the significance of race and gender in American national politics. *The Intersection of Race and Gender in National Politics* is an examination of how women, minorities, and minority women have experienced unequal political rights and participation due to historical and contemporary policies and ideas about race and gender. Parham-Payne establishes the ways that race and gender work individually to undermine women and people of color in the American political system. The heart of the book, though, focuses on the intersectional ways that Black women have been doubly oppressed by their race and gender in American politics that have limited their power and representation as voters and officeholders. Parham-Payne's assessment is not merely pessimistic, though, as she argues that Black women play significant roles as voters and legislators in American political system, particularly the Democratic Party, despite or because of the historical discrimination. She explains that "to be Black and female is to be innately political, as the collective, lived experience of Black women has often required that they act as advocates for themselves and their respective communities" (3). Parham-Payne's assessment seems prescient at this moment in American society when academics and political pundits have recognized the critical contributions of African American women in the 2016 and 2018 national elections and African American politicians such as Kamala Harris and Stacy Abrams have emerged as national leaders and viable presidential possibilities in the upcoming 2020 election.

The book is structured in a series of short chapters that elucidate themes related to race, gender, and politics. It opens with a chapter that examines the significance which Black women have always played in American politics, including the slavery era, the period following emancipation, the modern Civil Rights Movement, and in the present day. This overview is significant for establishing the longstanding interest and participation in political activism by Black women throughout American history. However, this broad scope of history is covered in eight pages and involves brief summaries of prominent figures such as Harriet Tubman, Mary Bethune McLeod, and Ella Baker, instead of more nuanced examination of the political efforts of ordinary Black women to resist oppression and effect change in American society. The second chapter focuses on policy interests important to women in general, minorities in general, and Black women as members straddling both groups, and how legislators from the three categories have advocated for these issues.

Barack Obama's successful campaign to be the first Black president is the subject of chapter three. Parham-Payne analyzes Black women's perceptions of the impact of race and gender on the campaign. This is one of the strongest chapters in the book as Parham-Payne analyzes primary evidence from focus groups of American voters, whereas many of the other chapters rely on secondary sources. The focus group members believed that Obama's success would have a positive effect on the political participation of minorities and viewed his candidacy as a Black man as more historically significant than Hillary Clinton's as a white woman. They also, though, noted the influence of negative stereotypes about Black women that future

candidates would have to overcome to be viewed as viable presidential candidates. Their discussion included prominent tropes about Black women such as caretaker, mammy, bitch, and slut. These tropes also appear in chapter five about the media depiction of Black women politicians. In both of these chapters, the book would benefit from a more in-depth analysis of the creation, persistence, and impact of these caricatures of Black women that undermine their credibility as potential political leaders.

The author provides an overview of the historical and ongoing impact of gender and race in national politics in chapter four. She discusses the political role of race and gender in history and contemporary America separately first, and then examines the intersectional and intensifying effects of race and gender that marginalize women of color in politics. The analysis of ideas about race and gender in contemporary politics is insightful and draws on evidence from the 2008 Collaborative Multi-Racial Post-Election Survey (CMPS). As with the historical material from chapter one, though, the historical overview of race and gender in American politics and government is extremely brief and inadequate to cover this rich and relevant material.

As mentioned earlier, chapter five examines the role of the American media in shaping a negative narrative about Black women in general and specifically as politicians. Parham-Payne views the media as critical in shaping ‘cultural perceptions and norms’ that “perpetuate a status quo” through symbols, rhetoric, and imagery that undermines the political credibility of women, particularly women of color (63). Payne-Parham argues that the media portrayals frame Black women as unfit and unprepared for national office and cites coverage of Black women such as Anita Hill, Lani Guinier, Susan Rice, and Michelle Obama as examples of these disparaging narratives. The negative tropes about Black women, paired with an overall lack of coverage of Black women political leaders, according to Parham-Payne make it harder for them to develop national reputations or to influence public policy effectively. In addition, she argues that the degrading stereotypes help discourage other Black women from entering national politics.

Many commentators have expressed great concern about the destructive effects of campaign donations on American politics, especially in the wake of the 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United* that removed many restrictions on campaign financing and made it easier for big money to distort elections and democracy. In chapter six, Parham-Payne demonstrates that factors of race and gender limit the ability of women, minority men, and minority women to access to campaign funding through PACs and other means compared to white male candidates. Thus, campaign financing is another structural factor hindering more diverse candidates from running for and winning national political positions.

The conservative turn of the U.S. Supreme Court also plays a role in chapter seven about the impact of the Voting Rights Act. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 removed racial restrictions to voting and allowed Southern African Americans to vote for the first time since the undermining of Reconstruction constitutional protections in the late nineteenth century. Parham-Payne notes that the American voting population has grown increasingly diverse in race and ethnicity since the mid-1960s and that the United States will likely become a “majority-minority” country in the near future due to changing demographic trends (103). In addition to the demographic changes, Parham-Payne notes that younger Americans are more educated and more liberal than older Americans about race, women and people of color as candidates, and interracial dating and marriage. In recent years, though, the Supreme Court severely gutted the Voting Rights Act in its 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* decision that allowed states to use techniques such as voter ID laws to suppress minority political participation. Also, as a result of the Voting Rights Act and other Civil Rights advocacy, the Democratic Party experienced great

white flight by white voters, encouraged by race-baiting politics by the Republican Party. Accordingly, over the past several decades, the Democratic Party has become increasingly racially and ethnically diverse since the 1960s and the Republican Party has become increasingly dependent on white voters.

The book ends on an awkward note due to timing and political events. It was published during the primaries of the 2016 election when Hillary Clinton was the probable Democratic nominee with a good chance of becoming the American president. In the final pages, Parham-Payne claims that a Clinton presidency, following the Obama one, could indicate that the American population has finally moved past the “status quo of middle age white males” as presidents (126). She also discusses how important it would be for Clinton to court Black women as a powerful voting bloc during the election, and once in office, that she should place women of color in high-profile political appointments. These assessments are painful to read in light of the ascendancy of Donald Trump to president and the political and social divisiveness that has followed the past several years. Undercutting Parham-Payne’s optimism about the political future, during Trump’s presidency, misogyny and racism has intensified and become more publicly prominent in American politics and society. Parham-Payne’s central argument, though, about the critical role of Black women in American national politics has also been heightened in Trump’s America, where the Black women’s voting, political service, and issues carry increasing political significance to reverse the policies and effects of the Trump presidency in the 2020 election and afterward.

Furthermore, the author’s advice on how a woman of color could construct a successful national campaign could be helpful to Black women in upcoming elections. Parham-Payne argues that effective campaigns should adopt the following strategies:

- 1) “Create a Broad, Cross-Cultural Campaign.” In this strategy, Black women candidates would demonstrate their ability to represent issues and populations of a wide variety of races, ethnicities, and classes, particularly focusing on economic issues important to low-income and middle-class Americans.
- 2) “Champion a Hot Button Issue that Impacts Women of All Demographics.” Candidates should make an effort to understand and represent issues important to women as women and/or mothers from diverse racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds.
- 3) “Leverage Technology.” Candidates should seek funding and publicity from outside traditional networks by creating political and financial support in a grassroots fashion by utilizing social media and digital donations to reach ordinary Americans and bypass the big money effects of the *Citizens United* decision.
- 4) “Engage the Younger Generations.” Through the book, Parham-Payne uses data to indicate that younger Americans are more open-minded on issues of race and gender than older ones and Black women candidates should find ways to engage with younger people as voters. (124-126).

Overall this is a valuable book on the historical and ongoing effects of race and gender on American politics. Its accessible overview and coverage of many different themes in American politics makes it most useful as an accessible general introduction on the themes of race, gender, and politics suitable for undergraduate students and members of the public. Similarly, scholars, especially in sociology and political science, interested in Americans’ perceptions of race and gender in relation to contemporary national politics will find those chapters valuable and enlightening. Experts on history of Black women, gendered nature of American politics and government, or feminist theory, though, are likely to be disappointed by the brevity of analysis of

these themes in the book. The book's historical background about the traditions of race, gender, and politics, could be a strong and necessary complement to the contemporary issues. In its current form, though, it is inadequate to be explanatory or formative of the contemporary trends. The book is at its best and makes the strongest contributions when Parham-Payne analyzes the role of race and gender on the contemporary American political scene. The book offers hope for progressive Americans that Parham-Payne's analysis and assessments may help Black women to run successful campaigns for national political offices and overcome the structural and historical underrepresentation of and inequality against women of color in American society and government.