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Trump and Traditional Masculinity as a Right to Leadership

Donald Trump is the 45th president of the United States. Despite that fact, he has yet to act in a way considered presidential, though Trump has acted in a way considered masculine. Trump's time as a political candidate was conducted under the shadow of a continuous stream of controversies based in unpresidential behaviour: the "grab her by the pussy" debacle caught on record with Billy Bush, a slew of racist comments and behaviours towards other nations, and the shadow of Russian interference with the election. Since taking office, Trump has even been impeached by the U.S. House of Representatives, although he was ultimately acquitted by the Senate. The question this paper is asking is what makes Trump a leader when it isn't his command of political knowledge or his ability to make political allies.

Methodology

The following paper will examine the correlation between Trump and masculinity and masculinity as a way of understanding and even justifying the right to power-specifically, political power. This examination will be based on Murray Edelman's theory of political leadership and the pattern of popular online news publications from Trump's election year, 2016, to the end of Trump's term in 2020, that describe Trump as masculine or in possession of

masculine traits.

Polls taken to measure public sentiments towards the president, trust in the government and others, and perception of politics as positive or negative from 2016 to 2020 were also used to contextualise the appeal of traditional leadership embodied in recognizable and long standing traits such as traditional masculinity.

Literature Review

Scientific Definition of Masculinity and Edelman's Theory of Leadership. Amanda Mull, writing for *The Atlantic*, described the current psychological understanding of masculinity in "Psychology Has A New Approach to Building Healthier Men". Mull contextualises work done by the American Psychological Association, which released a set of guidelines in January 2019 to treat men and boys. This set of guidelines included a scientific definition of traditional masculinity which, according to a psychologist who worked on the guidelines, describes as "an extreme form of stoicism, dominance, violence, and aggression".

Edelman's theory of political leadership is based on research on leadership that was being done in the 1960s. The theory that this research promoted was that leaders are not superior persons, either individually or within their respective fields but rather that the "*emphasis...is rather upon the willingness of followers to follow*" (p.73). Edelman goes on to state that "*when an individual is recognized as a legitimate leading official of the state, he becomes a symbol of some or all the aspects of the state: its capacity for benegitting and hurting, for threatening and reassuring*" (p. 74). The point the Edelman highlights refers to the idea that people behave in ways they understand, and that a particular leader can't

precede the context that established and legitimized this particular leader.

As a powerful masculine figure, Trump has the ability to represent a defender of the nation, regardless of his actual degree of competency in the field he'll be acting in. Furthermore, Trump is a strong figure of traditional masculinity in a time where there is low levels of trust in political institutions. This paper will seek to show that, while Trump may be perceived at being ill equipped for his political position and may even be judged negatively on his behaviour, he is a revocable status symbol because of his strong masculinity, which is a particularly valuable asset in a time of socio-political distrust.

Public Distrust in Political Institutions and Push-Back against Elitism. The Pew Research Center conducted a 2019 poll that shows that Americans have low levels of trust in each other and in the government, and cite low levels of trust as a reason why “problem solving” is harder. 36% of those polled cited government performance as the cause of distrust in government. An NPR Poll conducted in January 2020 showed that around 60% of Democrats and 11% of Republicans think that the U.S. is not prepared to keep U.S. elections secure, with an overall 40% of adults polled reporting that they don't think the U.S. will keep elections secure.

What these polls help to illuminate is the conditions that exist around the Trump presidency. While distrust in the government and political leaders preexists Trump, the point of bringing distrust into the forefront of the discussion surrounding the phenomena of the Trump presidency is what status symbols are recognizable even in a context of upheaval and distrust. Additionally, Trump's rhetoric appeals to anti-elitist sentiments and populist sentiments. In an evaluation of anti-elitism and conflict around free-speech in a university environment,

particularly in the era of Trump, Barbara Read of the University of Glasgow cites the rise of populism and an increase in the expression of masculinity: “Collective performances of ‘tough’ masculinity reach its exaggerated epitome within fascism and neo-fascist movements, one strand of the new ‘radical’ or ‘alt-‘ right.” and “As Miller-Idriss (2017) discusses, this philosophy is founded on the valorization of a masculinity that is highly militaristic and authoritarian, stressing both belonging and camaraderie between men and ‘the urge to express anger and frustration at mainstream society’ (200).”

Trump’s aggressive behaviour as an individual also plays a central role in his approach to policy and politics, and Trump doesn’t have a political persona that exists outside of his personal one. Since hyper-masculinity, and the drive to reinforce it, also relates to a perceived attack on masculinity, or individuals who identify as male and feel emasculated or insecure, Trump’s every move that appeals to and reinforced masculinity appeals to individuals who feel insecure in their masculinity.

Increased Appeals to Masculinity. A poll conducted by FiveThirtyEight shows 42.7% approval and 53.1% disapproval for Trump (as of 3/10/2020). Another poll conducted by Gallop shows an average of 40% job approval for Trump overall, and a 47% approval rate for February of his fourth year in office. This approval rating is higher than Trump’s predecessor, Barack Obama, who had an approval rating of 45% in February of his fourth year in office, but lower than the average for presidential job approval, which is around 53%. These polls can be taken to indicate two general patterns that support the idea of Trump as a masculine status symbol instead of a political one: 1) Trump as a an ineffective political leader, and judged as such and 2) Trump as a

return to a specific kind of man after the presidency of Obama, who was non-traditional in his appearance compared to every other president.

Bruce Drake and Jocelyn Kiley for the *Pew Research Center* polled Americans between April 29-May 13 of 2019, and published findings that show the effects of leadership that's informed by Trump's presidency and his masculine traits. Based on data shared in this article, 85% of American adults think political debate in the U.S. has become less respectful and more negative, and 55% believe Donald Trump has changed the tone and nature of political debate in the U.S. for the worse. 24% think Trump changed the tone and nature of political debate for the better. 84% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents say that "Trump has changed political discourse for the worse" and "about half of Republicans and Republican leaders (49%) say he (Trump) has changed it for the better".

The overall takeaway is that Trump is perceived as having a negative impact on political discourse in general, excluding Republicans and Republican-leaning. Republicans, however, tend to be traditionalists and to respect masculine traits, particularly in men. Another study by the Pew Research Center shows that 78% of Republicans polled think it's a good thing that society looks up to masculine men, as opposed to 49% of Democrats. Republican men are also more likely to describe themselves as "very" or "somewhat" masculine (39% and 52% respectively) before saying they are "not too/not at all" masculine (8%). Democrat men voted 23%, 55%, and 21% for the same questions. The most significant difference here is the votes for "not too/not at all" masculine, with a 13 percentage point difference between Democrats and Republicans.

Not only does this establish that there is tension surrounding the importance of

masculinity, meaning that different socio-political demographics have an active concept of masculinity that they're referencing, but demonstrates that masculinity exists as an active social concept that varies in value based on political orientation. Though different political groups were polled, the question of whether or not a person considered themselves to be masculine wasn't directly linked to political value or political leadership itself. Masculinity exists around politics and plays a role in how individuals understand and value themselves.

Emily Carian and Taggart Sobotka describe the relationship between a perceived threat to masculinity and the likelihood that men will pursue expression of masculinity, extending to voting for masculine leaders. The researchers randomly assigned a group of participants to different groups: the groups were supplied with graphs that showed that unemployment in their area was going to remain stable, or where employment in their area would either 1) decrease for men and increase for women, known as "male threat" or 2) decrease for women and increase for men, known as "male affirm".

Carian and Sobotka's research did not yield the result that masculine leadership necessarily had to be male, but did show a correlation between male threat and pursuing masculine leadership: "We find that men who perceived a threat to men's group position were significantly more likely to desire a masculine president, which indirectly explained increased support for Donald Trump and decreased support for Hillary Clinton".

This supports the idea that Trump's status as a leader relates, more than anything, to his status as a "masculine" leader: not only does Trump not excel in politics, but he wasn't even ranked as exceedingly masculine by participants in Carian and Sobotka's research. Trump's

behavior as both a presidential candidate and as president reenforce the trope of traditional masculinity.

Trump as a Masculine Leader. John F. Harris, writing for *Politico Magazine*, wrote in “Is Donald Trump a Manly Man?” about Trump’s political appeal. According to Harris, this appeal lies in Trump’s display of a masculine identity: “In interviews and emails, these backers tell me they regard Trump as ‘strong’. His battles with adversaries reveal him as “tough.” What in a conventional light looks outrageous—the bragging, the insults, the defiance, the rule skirting, the shredding of familiar standards of how a president should act—in this more sympathetic light looks like charisma. It gives him the aura of ‘a winner’.”

Trump is a “tough” guy, a “strong” guy, and most importantly, Trump is “sympathetic” when he responds as a tough guy while under attack. Responding in this fashion can only be sympathetic if it is expected- the “tough guy” act becomes aggressive when the act is unanticipated or unfounded. Especially as a repeated form of behaviour and from a political leader, where there is room to anticipate a tactful response.

Frank Bruni for the *New York Times* wrote on Trump’s particular obsession with masculinity: “But I’m not sure that any president over the past half century was as perversely insistent on his manhood, as narrow in his definition of it and as superficially fixated on brute strength as the Oval Office’s current occupant (Trump) is.” Bruni goes on to note that “We sorely need a better and more nuanced model of masculinity. Instead we have Trump, the “Access Hollywood” president, whose message is that real men fetishize weapons, glorify brutality, degrade their adversaries and grope the objects of their

affection.” Bruni’s description of Trump is of a hyper-masculinized leader who puts down others.

Roger Friedland for ResetDialogues directly calls out the connection between Trump and his approach to producing political currency: “For Trump, political power is a manifestation of manliness. And men responded overwhelmingly to his call, by a 12-percentage point margin according to CNN exit polls”. Political power doesn’t exist without making an appeal to something that already exists within the public psyche.

That is what makes Trump’s symbolism hard to deconstruct, because his right to political power was never the driving force in his rise to political power. Instead, it was his masculinity that was understood as powerful. But without the ability to negatively portray masculinity, there is no outright method of calling Trump out for being masculine, and the fact that his masculinity was the driving force behind his election indicates that the lines between the right to power based on masculinity and the right to power based on political savvy or knowledge are already blurred.

Outside of politics, Friedland classifies Trump as a status figure within masculinity: “Trump represents a return to the masculine principle as the ground of the order of creation, and most importantly in the current circumstances, to the order of destruction. He has the capacity to kill and subordinate those who would do us harm, to smash the interest-groups who hobble American policy-making and convert their interests into our own.

It is only such a man who can bring down crippled institutions and create new ones, who can – as was repeatedly mantra-like among his supporters, bring ‘real change’. Trump is

an action figure for our times, a strong man against a bad history. It's his dick that called many to his side.”

Most notable in this description is a direct reference to Trump's physical possession of male traits. Appeals to anatomical position is one of the simplest ways to approach a dichotomy, particularly along lines of differentiation between power and politics and between masculinity and power. If it can be acknowledged that there is an appearance to power, moving in a straight line between possession of powerful physiology and power as status.

Conclusion

The question this paper explored was the correlation between Trump as a status symbol and that status being sourced by Trump's embodiment of traditionally masculine traits.

Particularly in an era of sociopolitical distrust, which has the potential to increase voters' interest in gravitating towards strong leadership- even if this leadership is ineffective. Trump is

consistently linked to masculine traits and behaviours, as noted by popular news sites like CNN, NBC News, NPR, and *The New York Times*.

Data from polls taken from the election period preceding Trump's presidency, and his presidency itself, yield information of public sentiments that reflect strong political polarization and distrust of both the government and other members of society. While neither of these attitudes can be used as the sole factor in explaining Trump's status as a political leader, or explain his potential reflections should that occur which might solidify Trump's status as a political leader instead of as a status symbol set in a political context, recognition of Trump's masculinity is a consistent factor across time and source material. This consistency between

Trump and masculinity shows that Trump's status as a leader is understood through the lens of masculinity, and indicates that Trump's status refers to his masculinity at least in part.

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