

Review Essay

The Highest Glass Ceiling: Women's Quest for the American Presidency. By *Ellen Fitzpatrick*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016. 318 pp. Notes, index. Cloth, \$25.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-08893-1.

Reviewed by Mary A. Yeager

The Highest Glass Ceiling appeared just before the 2016 election. Hillary's ghost hovers. The U.S. presidency remains a male stronghold with its glass ceiling intact. Fitzpatrick and her publisher undoubtedly saw opportunity in a probable Clinton victory. There is a brief prologue and epilogue about Clinton that bookends the biographies of three other women who competed for the presidency in different eras: Victoria Woodhull, the Equal Rights Party candidate in 1872; Margaret Chase Smith, the 1964 Republican nominee; and Shirley Chisholm, the 1972 Democratic challenger.

In selecting these four women out of the two hundred or so other women who have either "sought, been nominated, or received votes for the office of the President," Fitzpatrick adds an American puzzle to a growing and globalizing stream of research that has tackled the question of gender in political campaigns and in business (p. 5). Why have women been so disadvantaged relative to men as political leaders and top executives, perhaps more so in the democratic market-oriented United States than almost anywhere else in the world? Scholars have begun to examine how women compete for the top executive jobs and the conditions under which they are successful. They have devised contemporary experiments using a variety of decision rules to understand how gender affects women's and men's participation in politics. They have analyzed cultural norms to better understand how they intertwine with and affect female success. They have spotted remarkable patterns and perplexing dissimilarities across cultures, firms, and electoral systems. Yet of the seventy countries that have had a female head of state or government at some point, only a handful have directly elected a female leader by popular vote.

Fitzpatrick's small cast of American characters enables her to direct a drama of historical agency that builds to a suspenseful climax. There is

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no heavy messaging or unnecessary exposition. There is variety, similarity and difference, push and pull, joy and disappointment, networking, and alliance making and breaking. To the extent that sources permit, each woman drives the competition, exercises voice, and shapes and responds to a battery of questions about campaign strategies, clothes, bodies, family relationships, gender, and age. Each strategizes, agonizes, and rationalizes as she lays claim to national visibility as a potential political leader. So engaged, ambitious, and effective are these exceptional women that their collective biographies tell a tale of success more than failure, each woman inching closer to victory than the last.

Obstacles there are, some of them self-made, some man-made, and others embedded in patriarchal institutional structures. But Fitzpatrick shows how each woman necessarily stepped out of context to attain visibility on the national level. She collectivizes women's struggles in ways that empower women as individuals. By focusing more on the journeys than the electoral outcomes, she invites us to look at the men who constructed ceilings out of unbreakable glass that reflect their own image.

The first of Fitzpatrick's presidential contenders, and the most improbable, is Victoria Woodhull, who envisioned herself as president before women could vote. The feminist-spiritualist overcame a disastrous first marriage to a philandering alcoholic at age fifteen before marrying a second time, to a more supportive Civil War veteran, and befriending fellow spiritualist Cornelius Vanderbilt, who shared her interest in stocks, bonds, and gold. She and a younger sister opened the first female brokerage house on Wall Street in 1870, a move that earned them money and celebrity status as "Queens of Finance" and the support of feminists and suffragists who considered it a savvy way to protect women against the predations of male-dominated Wall Street firms. Three months later, Woodhull announced her intention to run for the presidency as a candidate of the Equal Rights Party, which she had helped to organize. She launched her own newspaper to bolster her candidacy, set herself up as a test of political equality, and used her success in business as proof of her leadership abilities and testimony that she was already exercising rights that all women possessed. She did not intend to wait for men to grant women suffrage. She won a hearing before Congress and boldly declared that the Constitution implicitly granted women the right to vote. The men disagreed.

The speed with which Woodhull gained national visibility was matched by the swiftness of her fall. A woman sued her brokerage firm for mishandling funds. Her own mother brought suit against Woodhull's husband. During legal proceedings, the mother let slip that Victoria Woodhull was living with both her current and former spouses. The press pounced. Women were warned that support of Woodhull risked

their own reputations. The *New York Times* dethroned the “Queens” as financial frauds. Woodhull counterattacked. She turned the tables on one of her opponents, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, whom she accused of cohabiting with another man’s wife. She was prosecuted on obscenity charges, which landed her in jail on election day.

The Woodhull drama, pinched in time and compromised by scanty evidence, paves the way for a more deeply informed and chronologically satisfying narrative about Margaret Chase Smith. She was born in 1907 to parents who did not share in the prosperity of the growing wool and logging town of Skowhegan, Maine. Young Margaret landed jobs at the Maine Telephone Company and the Cummings woolen mill before marrying a philandering businessman-politician, Clyde Smith, in 1930. Had she not married him, Fitzpatrick suggests, she never would have run for the presidency. She facilitated Clyde’s election to the U.S. Congress in 1936 and, upon his death from syphilis in 1940, exercised the “widow’s mandate” to serve in the House until she ran on her own. So dutiful that she seldom missed a roll call vote, and so independent that the *New York Times* called her a stand-alone political party, she supported FDR’s war effort from her seat in the House for nearly a decade and in 1948 became the first woman to win a U.S. Senate seat. Self-identifying as a nonfeminist *and* a supporter of women’s rights, she considered boundaries porous enough to be crossed at any time. During the height of the McCarthy era she gave a rousing “Declaration of Conscience” speech that Bernard Baruch said would have assured her election to the presidency—had she been a man. Although she continued to prove herself to be a steadfast Cold War patriot, tough on communism and supportive of nuclear armament and the military, she lost the 1964 Republican presidential nomination to a younger Barry Goldwater. Handicapped by an underfunded and weak campaign organization and not helped by a press that continually emphasized her age and gender, she robbed Goldwater of a unanimous Republican nomination by refusing to release her twenty-nine delegates.

In 1968, four years after Smith’s Pyrrhic defeat, Shirley Chisholm became the first African American woman elected to the U.S. Congress. Four years later, she battled for the presidential nomination on the Democratic ticket. Fitzpatrick offers an account of Chisholm’s journey that is as compelling as the character she describes. A gutsy, keenly competitive, and caring daughter of Caribbean émigré parents, Chisholm refused to let anyone or anything—including her sex—stop her. Born in 1924, one of four sisters, she thrived in a hard-working, pro-union family that valued education and instilled in the young Chisholm an admiration for Marcus Garvey and a self-aware confidence in her own abilities. After working in a jewelry factory during college and being rejected

for several teaching positions after graduation, she plunged into machine-driven politics in New York's Twelfth Congressional District, a democratic stronghold that had nourished other notable black leaders, including James Farmer and Wes Holder, both of whom, at different moments, challenged and subsequently supported Chisholm's political ambitions. Notable feminists rallied to support many of her legislative causes in the House, including Chisholm's support for working women, daycare, education, abortion rights, and unemployment insurance for household workers. Her decision to pursue the Democratic nomination in 1972 challenged the testosterone-driven campaigns of both Democrats and Republicans. Nixon and his team embarked upon a smear campaign, alleging that Chisholm—dressed “as a transvestite in men's clothing”—had spent time in a Virginia mental institution for schizophrenia (p. 221). Some feminist leaders, including Betty Friedan, threw their support behind George McGovern, as did some key leaders in the African American community, who bemoaned the absence of a male candidate. Gloria Steinem vacillated. Chisholm, denied airtime in the California primary debates, won in New Jersey and in fourteen other states. She refused to choose between being a woman and being African American or between feminism and black struggle; she did not disavow the Black Panthers; she considered busing better than nothing; and she supported the core demands of modern feminism. Unlike Margaret Chase Smith, who never acknowledged any discrimination, Chisholm admitted that the “harshest discrimination I have encountered in the political arena is anti-feminist, both from males and from brain-washed Uncle Tom females” (p. 97). Of her two biggest handicaps, she considered gender a more significant obstacle than race.

Gender also handicaps Fitzpatrick's own effort to understand the 2016 presidential race in light of other women challengers who preceded Clinton. Constrained by the outcome of a still undecided election, Fitzpatrick discards her director's hat. She dons the hat of a social scientist. She cites voting statistics to show how close Clinton came to beating Barack Obama for the nomination in 2008. She briefly describes three of Hillary's contemporaries who ran but failed to win a nomination. She informs us of a gender gap in male-female voting preferences that began in 1980 and narrowed and widened across several election cycles. She uses 2016 polling results to show that more women than men intended to support candidate Clinton. She reviews Hillary's record of government service. She singles out the two-party system and inadequate fundraising as major obstacles for everyone except Hillary. She reminds us that “no woman who got anywhere in a major political party advanced without the support of powerful men,” but concedes that some husbands proved to be liabilities (p. 234). Even as

Fitzpatrick hedges her bets about Clinton, she declares that “no woman in American history has come closer” (p. 255).

Implicit in the promise is the disappointment. Women supported Clinton over Trump by 54 percent to 42 percent but more men supported Trump than Clinton, by 53 percent to 41 percent (pewresearch.org, 9 Nov. 2016). Fitzpatrick does not mention Donald Trump. Nor does she accord any but the most cursory attention to the men who ran against Woodhull, Chase Smith, and Chisholm. There is little mention of male campaign strategies, party platforms, or the gendered rules that frame congressional elections and the two-party system. Gender is disempowered. It functions more as a marker of female identity than a power tool to interrogate male-female interactions. “The quest was now a political contest,” Fitzpatrick concludes, as if electoral competition was not a gendered process and women had achieved equal authoritative representation with men, simply by demonstrating leadership potential (p. 255).

Context has much to do with whether, and how, gender is manifested. Gender is more than a trait of individuals. As Cecilia Ridgeway reminds us, it is “an institutionalized system of social practices” (“Gender, Status, and Leadership,” *Social Issues* [2001]: p. 637). Gender stereotypes contain status beliefs. As long as the American voting public, press, and political parties accord men greater worthiness and competence as leaders than women, political contests will continue to empower more men than women. This may well hold for business, where the glass ceilings of corporate America remain virtually impenetrable except by a tiny minority of exceptional women, whose tenure as leaders has proved precarious.

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