

“Masculinity, Misogyny, and Political Image-Crafting in Russia and the United States”

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Abstract

The methodological use of gender analysis in political science is no longer a novelty. But while asking, “Where are the women?” remains important, questions about how political arrangements are reinforced (or threatened) by popular conceptions of properly gendered behavior are only infrequently integrated into political science inquiry. For example, looking at gender norms (masculinity and femininity) as tools of political legitimation has helped shed light on how the machismo-centric Putin regime remains in power. The study of gender normative discourse and action advances our disciplinary understanding of how political actors contend for power in democracies as well as in authoritarian states. In political systems around the globe, political leaders, candidates, and activists use masculinity, femininity, misogyny, and homophobia to recruit support for themselves and also to undermine the credibility of their opponents. Analyzing the dialectical (tit-for-tat) use of gender norms by rival political actors clarifies a key mechanism by which political power can be maintained and also challenged. Even many “liberal” opponents of “macho” politicians choose to attack their opponents in misogynist and homophobic ways, thus reinforcing patriarchal gender norms.

This paper looks at political image-crafting in contemporary Russia and the United States through the lens of gender analysis. While acknowledging that popular masculine norms differ from place to place, we find that both Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump have attempted to project a masculine image as a means of garnering popular support in the context of both domestic and foreign affairs. However, because masculinity lends no authority to its bearer if it is not contrasted to exemplars of its opposite – i.e. femininity – Putin, Trump, their allies, and their respective rivals also label their opponents as weak and “unmanly.” We argue that the use of gender norms as political tools and weapons is a pervasive technique that is evident and important both in contemporary Russian politics and in the United States, and that examining them in these two settings sheds light on the mechanisms of their operation. We illustrate this with examples of politically mobilized misogyny and masculinity from the Putin era, the U.S. presidential election campaign in 2016, and the Trump administration in office.

¹ The paper will be based on a larger project I’m co-authoring with my Clark colleague, Robert Boatright (an Americanist).