Television representations of political women: Reinforcing or disrupting gender constructs?

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Abstract

This article examines representations of fictitious political women in Commander in Chief (2005-2006), Veep (2012-) and Political Animals (2012) using frameworks of leadership, stereotypes, the public-private, novelty and institutional structures to determine if social constructions of gender are being reinforced or disrupted. This analysis is contextualised within studies on voter attitudes and management theory which affirm a view that politics is a ‘man’s game’.

Keywords women politicians, television, social constructs, gender, representations

Introduction

Even with decades of research the ‘taken-for-granted differentiation between men and women’ still needs to be demonstrated as a social construction (Inaki Garcia-Blonco and Karin Wahl-Jorgenson 2012, 423). Television is one space where social constructions of gender require ongoing interrogation. As a space of ‘social performance’ television shapes ‘realities’ about gender (Butler 1999, 180). ‘Social performances’ normalise acceptable and preferred attributed in relation to political power (Garcia-Blonco and Wahl-Jorgenson 2012, 424). Female politicians may no longer suffer what Gaye Tuchman (1978) termed ‘invisibility’ and American television
now produces more dramas which feature women in positions of elite political power than even before. What is of consideration is how fictitious political women are represented and how these representations may in fact reinforce social constructions of gender rather than disrupt them. The dominant construct of American politics remains ‘masculine’ (Karen Ross and Annabelle Sreberny 2000; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996; Shirley Rosenwasser and Norma Dean 1989; Michelle Bligh et al. 2012). This paper considers what role recent television dramas that present elite female politicians do to reinforce or disrupt this view. The first half of this paper is a review of research that posits why politics is perceived as a ‘man’s game’. This review then intersects with dramatic representation of three female political leaders: a president, a vice president and a secretary of state, to evaluate how the ‘social performances’ contribute to our knowledge of the social constructions of gender in politics.

**Research: Politics is a ‘man’s game’**

Voter research shows that masculinity is considered a central leadership trait (Deborah Alexander and Kristie Anderson 1993). Studies show American electors consistently favour masculine traits in their leaders (Kathleen Dolan 2005; Leoni Huddy and NaydaTerkildsen 1993; Linda Witt, Karen Paget, and Glenda Matthews 1995). Management and occupation studies assert there are gender stereotypes which affect perceptions of women’s leadership abilities and associate power with men. Power, authority and prestige are routinely accompanied with male stereotypes of strength, independence and competency (Peter Glick, Korin Wilk, and Michele Perreault 1995).
In times of political or economic uncertainty, studies indicate voters more likely want a male leader, who they consider more competent in dealing with crisis (Falk and Kenski 2006). This result mirrors military leadership studies that find masculine characteristics are preferred over feminine characteristics (Bligh et al. 2012; Alice Eagly and Steven Karau 2002; Lyn Kathlene 1989). In relation to crisis, this appears a particularly Western view. Evidence, for example, from South-east Asia suggests that at times of political and economic crisis, women presidential candidates have been successful (Jo Coghlan 2012). Evidence shows that gender stereotypes do shape evaluations about the role of women in politics (Dolan 2004). An extraordinary amount of research has been conducted on gendered stereotypes finding women politicians are often framed discursively (Kahn 1994; Kahn and Edie Goldenberg 1991; Ross 2004). Studies have examined how female candidates-politicians are considered by voters as warmer, compassionate, more liberal, progressive (Alexander and Anderson 1993; Kahn 1996; Jeffrey Koch 1999). Other studies have found women candidates-politicians as weak, inconsistent and not financially or economically competent (Wendy Simmons 2001). This sits alongside voter research that shows male politicians are considered strong, intelligent, better able to address crime, defence, foreign policy, war, terrorism and are more conservative (Jennifer Lawless 2004).

When female politicians do exert power it can result in a backlash. The exercise of political authority by women is generally framed as counter stereotypical behaviour. When male politicians exercise political authority rather than be framed as being aggressive, it is framed as normative, given the gendered construct of politics (Gidengil and Everitt 2003). In evaluations of women who have been elected to political office, research shows that there are likely repercussions if they act outside of society’s understanding of gender roles (Alexander and
Female politicians that act strongly, independently, and with authority are routinely criticised and devalued because they are engaging in what society perceives as masculine behaviour (Eagly, Mona Makhijani, and Bruce Klonsky 1992). Apparent violations of perceived gender roles results in social and political sanctions that may not just adversely affect the transgressor but may be applied to future female politicians (Laurie Rudman and Kathleen Fairchild 2004; Rudman and Glick 2001).

Research also points to the structural-institutional factors that impact on women candidates-politicians. Political parties should be considered in any discussion of the level of female representation in politics. While more research is needed in this area there are some compelling studies that point to: the processes of gendered candidate recruitment (Karen Dale and Gibson Burrell 2008; Kira Sanbonmatsu 2003); the lack of female candidates seeking nominations (Lawless and Richard Fox 2005); inadequate campaign resources for female political aspirants (Dale and Burrell 2008); and the party itself. In relation to the latter, research shows that in American politics, the party itself may impact on the chances of women candidates (Koch 2000; Dolan 2010; Ross 1995). Likely, Democrats are more comfortable with female candidates whereas the opposite may be the case for Republicans (Richard Matland and David King 2002; Lawless and Kathryn Pearson 2008). Voting behaviour and voter attitudes may also likely have an impact on any candidate preference or selection (Pillai et al. 2003; Pillai et al. 1997).

Historically, gendered social construction located women in the ‘private’ sphere and men in the ‘public’ sphere. While feminist scholarship has largely disrupted this discourse, there still exist patriarchal structures that seek to reinforce a gendered public-private divide. When women do transcend the private sphere, in the case of women winning political office, they are framed as
the ‘other’, and even a ‘novelty’ (Sreberny and Liesbet van Zoonen 2000; Charlotte Adcock 2010). The news media arguably play a role in perpetuating this. Studies continue to show that traditional news media coverage pays significant attention to the personal characteristics of female candidates-politicians. When female candidates-politicians are represented the narrative tends to focus on ‘comparatively trivial subjects’ such as ‘their physical appearance, lifestyle and family’ rather than on their ‘positions on prominent campaign issues’ (Philo Washburn and Mara Washburn 2011, 1028; Anderson 1995; Braden 1996; Robert McChesney 1999).

Age, dress, marital status and relationships, personal ethical beliefs, religious beliefs, status as a mother, and even voice, pitch, and tone are regularly part of political commentaries (Bligh et al. 2012; Geraldine Beddell 2009; Ross 2002; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996). While media commentators may consider personal characteristics as essential public information, it trivialises female candidates-politicians, especially when the same lens is not applied to men seeking office. Other studies confirm reporting of male candidates-politicians tends to focus on their occupation, accomplishments, experience, their previous public office, or contributions to public life (Kahn 1994; Gertrude Robinson and Armande Saint-Jean 1995).

Regardless of a women’s competency the focus on ‘how they look or sound, what they wear, or how they style their hair’ arguably ‘detracts voters from seriously considering their candidacy’ (Braden 1996, 5; Pippa Norris 1997). Female candidates-politicians, for the most part are reported within gendered frames, while male candidates-politicians are reported in gender neutral frames (Kathless Jamieson 1995). Female candidates-politicians are also subjected to frames of hyperdomesticity (Diane Negra 2009). This ‘having it all’ (Vereda Orr and Sal Humphreys 2014) view is problematic because it has a duality that is never ascribed to men. Framing women candidates-politicians within the subjective standard of ‘good’ is similarly
discursive and troubling (Diana Carlin and Kelly Winfrey 2009; Garcia-Blonco and Wahl-Jorgenson 2012). Compelling this is the framing of women as ‘individuals’ and men as part of a ‘group’ (Susan Carroll and Ronnee Schreiber 1997). The inference posits the ability of men to act in concert while female politicians are likely to act alone, not negotiate, hence maybe unable to influence political outcomes.

The positioning of women politicians in their singularity arguably denotes their uniqueness (which voters may see as a positive) but conversely it may postulate their isolation and lack of effectiveness (which voters may see as a negative). This positioning arguably feeds into gender polarisation, that is, the sexes are seen as opposing forces and unlikely to act in cooperation (Sandra Bem 1993). Another way research has demonstrated the problematic representations of women candidates-politicians is to question women’s motives for seeking power. In some instances women seeking office are perceived to be concerned with improving the status of women or to be only promoting women’s interests, consider perhaps by some voters as to the detriment of others in society (Amanda Diekman, Alice Eagly, and Patrick Kulesa 2002; Bligh et al. 2012).

Trivialisation continues when female candidates-politicians are represented as ‘novelty’ (Stephen Stambough and Valerie O‘Regan 2007). Coverage that highlights a woman as ‘breaking the glass ceiling’ or as being an ‘agent of change’ can be considered positive. Yet, it may also be a reminder that women have failed in the past to reach the upper echelons of power and there must now be a compelling reason for them achieving power. Other ways female political aspirants are represented as ‘novelties’ is the gender ‘double bind’. Here female politicians are portrayed as the ‘exception’ to the ‘feminine mainstream’ as well as being portrayed as the ‘other’ in the political sphere (Van Zoonen 2006, 298).
Having outlined some research that posits politics is a ‘man’s game’, the following discussion evaluates representations of three fictitious political women. The aim is to consider in what ways the ‘social performances’ of elite political women reinforce or disrupt social constructions and perceptions about women and political power. A brief synopsis begins this study. The three programs selected for this study are *Veep* (HBO 2012-2015), *Political Animals* (USA Network 2012) and *Commander in Chief* (ABC 2005).

**Analysis**

*Veep* is a satirical political drama following vice president ‘Selina Meyer’ (Julia Louis-Dreyfus). ‘Meyer’ is a divorced, single parent who was a Maryland Senator and one-time presidential candidate. In the first season examined for this analysis, we see ‘Meyer’ framed as running a dysfunctional office, have a relationship, fall pregnant, have an abortion, and cry to curry press favour. Her policies are constantly undermined by the president. She engages in no serious policy debate. She is only shown in the White House (but not the Oval Office) in two episodes.

*Political Animals* is a six-part miniseries focusing on secretary of state ‘Elaine Barrish’ (Sigourney Weaver). ‘Barrish’ is a former first lady married to a two-term, philandering president. ‘Barrish’, herself a former Governor of Illinois, ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic presidential nomination, but lost to a younger, more charismatic male candidate who goes on to win the presidency. ‘Barrish’ considers a second campaign for the presidential nomination.

*Commander in Chief* portrays the presidency of ‘Mackenzie Allen’ (Genna Davis), referred to as ‘Mac’, the first female and Independent American president, following the death of the sitting Republican president. As a former academic and briefly a member of Congress, ‘Mac’
(a moderate Republican who resigned from the party) was put on the Republican ticket to secure the ‘women’s vote’. Prior to the president’s death, he asks her not to assume the presidency. Agreeing to do so ‘Mac’ changes her mind when ‘Nathan Templeton’ (Donald Sutherland) the Speaker of the House of Representatives offends her ability to lead the nation because she is a woman. Each episode contains a core political issue, often foreign policy, but has multiple story lines regarding ‘Mac’s’ family.

**Leadership**

‘Meyer’ is vice president (*Veep*), ‘Barrish’ is secretary of state (*PA*) and ‘Mac’ (*CC*) is president. All three are former governors with political experience. The opening episodes show ‘Meyer’ (*Veep*) and ‘Barrish’ (*PA*) losing the presidential nomination and with ‘Mac’ being asked not to decline the presidency. In each instance, the openings imply women ‘losing’ political power. In each example, all three women have titles of power however there authority is undermined in multiple ways by men ‘playing politics’.

‘Meyer’ (*Veep*) throughout the season one asks “has the President called?” to which the answer is always no, positing her isolation. She is however asked by the president’s office to ‘fix’ problems that are framed as of her making. Her role is almost always defined in terms of reacting to the president rather than acting independently. In terms of power, ‘Meyer’s’ frustration is evident. “I’m the Vice President of the United States you stupid little fuckers. These people should be begging me. That door should be half its height so that people can only approach me in my office on their goddamn motherfucking knees” (*Veep* Ep. 4).
In entering a conflict to deliver the needs of the presidents multiple political interests, ‘Meyer’ are reminded she once had no power but balls. She responds “now look at me I have a dick and balls” (Veep Ep. 3). The conflict is ultimately resolved by a young, Machiavellian junior staffer, with his role narrated as ‘all part of the game’ (Veep Ep. 4). Again ‘Meyer’ is given a request by the president, delivered by the president’s staffer, ‘Meyer’ asks: “does he want to operate me by remote control”… (Veep, Ep. 4). Complying with each request from the president, most of which are minor political issues, she is ‘rewarded’ with the task of reducing obesity in America, which she resents (Veep Ep. 5) as a program not befitting a vice president (Veep Ep. 6).

Political Animals begins with ‘Barrish’ selecting her wardrobe prior to conceding defeat for the Democratic presidential primary. She is described by a journalist as everything from “a feminist liberal icon to an opportunistic closet conservative, cold and ambitious to warm and charming and unfairly maligned…” On losing the primary she says to the audience, singling out women: “please don’t be discouraged by my loss” (PA, Ep. 1). Campaigning for the man that defeated her for the Democratic nomination, two years later, ‘Barrish’ is appointed secretary of state to the winning Democratic candidate.

In episode one, we see ‘Barrish’ as America’s “leading diplomat” in the White House seeking a solution to a hostage crisis involving American journalists in Iran. In discussing a political solution with her son, she is not concerned that the President is “trading” on her “popularity”. The president undermines ‘Barrish’ in her negotiations with the Iranian government. While her authority is neutralised, the mise-en-scene occurs in the president’s office, unlike in Veep where ‘Meyer’ is never shown in the president’s office. As the narrative
develops ‘Barrish’ side-tracks the president and resolves the crisis using her ex-husband as an emissary (PA, Ep. 1).

In handing her resignation to the president which he rejects, ‘Barrish’ is asked to run with the president, this time as his vice president. Doubting her convictions to run against the president, she seeks advice from her ex-husband. ‘Barrish’ tells a journalist that the president has asked her to run as vice president, and she has agreed. As a “mother first” she rationalises that it is not time for her to run as president (PA, Ep. 6). The president’s plane crashes with no survivors or bodies found and the vice president enacts the 25th Amendment to assume the presidency. ‘Barrish’ acts to deny this occurring. This leaves the vice president as only the ‘acting’ president. With the president’s body recovered ‘Barrish’ is convinced by her ex-husband to run for the presidency against the now sworn in vice president. “They need a strong resilient competent leader to get them through this, the vice president isn’t that person” but ‘Barrish’ is (PA, Ep. 6).

On being told the president has had a stroke, as vice president, ‘Mac’ (CC, Ep. 1) asks to take the oath of office to assume the presidency. Instead she is asked to resign so that ‘Templeton’ can assume the presidency. In her questioning of the president’s decision to want her to step aside for ‘Templeton’, she is told of the current state of global uncertainty: “we don’t want to see soft indecisive women commanding the troops” (CC, Ep. 1). Following the death of the president, ‘Templeton’ meets with ‘Mac’ at her home with her resignation letter (in the shot but its contents are not known to ‘Templeton’). As ‘Mac’ sits calmly, ‘Templeton’ paces, telling her he knows the president asked her to resign. ‘Templeton’ and ‘Mac’ share this exchange:

‘Templeton’: “The world is in turmoil Mac it could go any which way. This is not the time for social advances made for the sake of social advances.”
‘Mac’: “Meaning a woman in the Oval Office”

‘Templeton’: “No. Meaning a woman as the leader of the free world. How many Islamic states do you think would follow the edicts of a woman?

‘Mac’: “Well, not only that, Nathan, but we have the whole ‘once a month, will she or won’t she press the button’ thing”

‘Templeton’ [laughing] “…in a couple of years you’re not going to have to worry about that anymore...You know that your vice presidency was never ever intended to be a presidency. It was done as a stunt...you’re a female...you’re an independent...you’re a teacher…”

‘Mac’: “University Chancellor”

‘Templeton’: “Philosophy Queen”

‘Templeton’: “But the point was it was all done for pure theatre and you got great reviews. But now you should get off the stage while the audience still loves you, before they figure out that your vice presidency was a whole lot of nothing…”

‘Mac’: “…I’m going to go out there, and I’m going to take the oath of office. I’m going to run this government and if some Islamic nations can’t tolerate a female president, then I promise you it will be more their problem than mine”.

‘Templeton’: “Why, why do you want to be president?”

‘Mac’: “For the same reasons [the former president] did. I believe the people of America deserve to have a president…”

‘Templeton’: “…the answer you should be giving me is that you want to be president because you want the power. You want the power to control the universe”.

‘Mac’: “That’s not me”.

‘Templeton’: “Well, that’s the problem…people who don’t want power have no idea what to do with it. They have no idea how to use it when they have it”

On realising the ‘Mac’ had been holding her resignation speech, now on the table, ‘Templeton’ recognises his mistake in attacking ‘Mac’ and proceeds to watch her be sworn in as president. In episode four we see ‘Templeton’ announce his decision to run against ‘Mac’. We
see him ‘playing the game’ of political manoeuvring against ‘Mac’. Her response is: “I thought we were going to do things differently” (CC, Ep. 4).

**Stereotypes**

In response to social media claims that ‘Meyer’ is a political lightweight and not in control of her office, she decides to disclose all office correspondence. The focus of the media is her diary showing her lover had spent nights at her home. ‘Meyer’ is not concerned that the plan aimed to redressed the view of her as a ‘political lightweight’ failed rather she is concerned about how the revelation of her having a secret lover is linked to the rumour she is pregnant (Veep, EP. 6). Other stereotypical storylines concern the rift ‘Meyer’ has with the president wife, narrated as a “cat fight” (Veep Ep. 3) and the ‘Meyer’ as a “diva” (Veep Ep. 3).

Crying, in response to an endorsement rebuff from a party candidate, her staff suggests she should cry more often to generate sympathy with the public in response to poor approval ratings. It is strategy that gets her positive polling. With the candidate realising that her ‘crying’ is “tracking well” and she is going from “toxic to turn on”, the candidate asks her to endorse him. A backlash emerges on Twitter under the hashtag “#fake veep weep” (Veep, Ep. 8). In response to the rumours that ‘Meyer’ is increasing dysfunctionality, she looks for a solution. Her female staffer suggests she should “do a piece in a sympathetic women’s magazine about the loss of the baby, buy you some time and some goodwill” (Veep Ep. 7).

The central stereotype attributed to ‘Barrish’ is the “women problem”, that is, she is not liked by women voters. Articulated in a flashback by her ex-husband during her failed presidential nomination, he says: “Elaine [Barrish] has done more for women’s issues than any other candidate in the primary…why is it that when people ask me about her ‘women problem’
they don’t tend to have a vagina” (*PA*, Ep. 3). In another flashback ‘Barrish’s’ ex-husband confesses: “I admit I was wrong. Elaine [Barrish] does have a women problem. I think some girls feel threatened by a women as intelligent, as accomplished…as my wife, and that’s why they feel more comfortable voting for her rival, who is inferior…because he has…a penis” (*PA*, Ep. 3).

Family relations, prior to ‘Mac’s family moving into the White House, are revealed in a flashback where we see ‘Mac’ and her husband in the family home in Connecticut talking with Republican leaders, she goes to leave the room to put the children to bed. Her husband expects that the Republicans are there to ask him to run for Congress, instead it is ‘Mac’ that is asked, to her husband’s disappointment. Later in the episode, ‘Mac’s’ husband and son have an argument that the country hasn’t noticed ‘Mac’ is the first female president because they are too busy making jokes about the “first gentleman” (*CC*, Ep. 5).

While there are many stereotypes used in each series examined, three in particular are evident. In *Veep* it is the stereotype of ‘Meyer’s’ crying, although it is framed as a political strategy, it is arguably a problematic stereotype that can only reinforce a negative view of women in the public-political sphere. For ‘Barrish’ in *Political Animals* it is the stereotype of women voters not liking strong women candidates, and especially a female politician that has ‘stood by her man’. For ‘Mac’ in *Commander in Chief* it is her having to nurture her husband’s ego and constantly attend to ‘family’ matters, a classic example of the hyperdomesticity of the ‘good’ women. Pregnancy, family dramas, and compromises made by each of the three lead female characters arguably do not occur in the same way as they do in male political dramas.

*Public/private*
While a reference to ‘Meyer’ (PA) as a parent, early episodes locate her in public spaces: official meetings, her office, but not in the Oval Office. She is not shown in her family home until episode four though it is not apparently clear that it is her home. Her marital status is not immediately apparent, though she is divorced. Her college aged daughter is introduced in episode three. Rather than family conflict it is more a case of a ‘gap’ between mother and daughter. ‘Meyer’s’ personal life is introduced in episode four with a scene showing her engaging in post-sex banter with her ‘secret lover’ in her home (Veep Ep. 4). In episode five, ‘Meyer’ admits that she has had unprotected sex and is concerned that she is pregnant. In confiding to her female staffer she says “it is a possibility… I haven’t reached menopause yet, you know, I am not barren…” (Veep Ep. 5).

Her staffer responds: “I am not doubting your fertility…but an unwed mother one aneurysm away from the presidency, how do you think that plays?” ‘Meyer’ responds: “I hope I’m not pregnant because fuck if I am I am just finished”. From her female staffer: “You know you’ll have to keep it”. From a male staffer: “The best thing for her [Meyer] legacy is she’s assassinated before she starts showing” (Veep Ep. 5). A pregnancy for an unmarried vice president is narrated as “career wise...like joining Scientology or getting a fucking neck tattoo”. On telling her lover that she is pregnant ‘Meyer’ says we have to get married. The male staffer realising that ‘Meyer’ is pregnant and needs to get married, leaves ‘Meyer’ to respond: it may be a “wedding or a suicide. I haven’t decided which” (Veep Ep. 5). Having a ‘miscarriage’ in the context of the mise-en-scene suggests she has had an abortion (Veep, Ep. 7).

‘Barrish’, on the night of losing the Democratic presidential nomination, tells her husband she wants a divorce. She is asked by a journalist if the divorce was a recognition that she no longer needed her former two-term president husband because her “political career was
over” (PA Ep. 1). The journalist asks further if ‘Barrish’ is disappointed that she didn’t win the nomination having stayed with her husband. Flashbacks are used to ‘explain’ ‘Barrish’s’ reasons for tolerating her husband’s infidelity “I did not have sex…..” while he was president, though later confesses the truth of his infidelity. Her belief in ‘marriage’ (shown again in flashbacks) confirms her belief in the institution of marriage (PA, Ep. 2).

Episodes feature numerous home/family issues with considerable location shots in the ‘Barrish’ home, particularly kitchen scenes and family meals. In confirming to her family at the dinner table of her decision to run for president again, her mother expresses her discontent at ‘Barrish’s’ decision to run for “Queen Shit of Elaine land” (PA, Ep. 3). In response ‘Barrish’ washes the dishes because it “calms her” (PA, Ep. 3). In trying to pass a child protection bill the vice president threatens ‘Barrish’ to support it because her son is having an affair with a married Republican closet congressman. Confronting her son, ‘Barrish’ tells her son to end the affair. “I am trying to help you” says ‘Barrish’ (PA, Ep. 4). Her son overdoses and the ‘Barrish’ family claim it is a reaction to medication. Willing to breach national security to a journalist, in order for the journalist to write a ‘soft’ story about her son, ‘Barrish’ says “as a mother” I will do anything to protect my son (PA, Ep. 5).

‘Mac’ discusses whether she should resign the vice presidency with her family, in the kitchen, before meeting the president who asks her to resign (CC, Ep. 1). ‘Mac’ agrees and drafts a letter of resignation. In the next scene, the president dies and ‘Templeton’s’ insults to Mac lead her to be sworn in as president in her family home. The public/private binary is blurred when the family move into the White House. On watching news coverage of her children going to school, she approaches the media pool, saying that as a “Mac the mother…don’t mess with my kids” (CC, Ep. 3).
‘Mac’ and her husband get into a conflict over his desire to take a job without “asking” her. While she feels they are “doing” the job together, he feels resentment at her position and takes a job outside of the White House (CC, Ep. 6) and then reneges. ‘Mac’ appoints him to her White House staff. Her chief of staff resents the input of ‘Mac’s’ husband especially as someone “who sleeps with the boss” (CC, Ep. 8). While most of these scenes are of happy family relations, it is the role of her husband as an advisor that causes ‘Mac’ tension and arguably puts her in positions of compromise.

**Novelty**

In the pilot of *Veep*, there are several scenes which focus on what ‘Meyer’ wears, including a reference to the reason she lost the nomination was because of a “hat”. Deciding to wear glasses or not to a public function, ‘Meyer’ comments that glasses make her look intellectual and focused, conversely they make her seem weak, “a wheelchair for the eyes” (*Veep* Ep.1). Her shortness functions to weaken her position, both in discussions with the president’s very tall staffer and her use of a platform to stand behind a lectern. A focus on media reporting of ‘Meyer’s’ wardrobe framed as a “fashion feud” with the first lady begins episode three.

Considering herself as having “very thick skin” ’Meyer’ is disturbed to find out about a list of nicknames used to refer to her, such as “Visible Penis” the most upsetting being “Viagra Prohibitor”. ‘Meyer’ says: “Because when a guy is with me he doesn’t need Viagra [chuckling]”. Her staffer responds, “No it means that even if a guy uses it…”. ‘Meyer’ realises the reality saying: “It [Viagra] doesn’t work. They are saying that a prescription medication that is supposed to guarantee a strong and sustained erection in all men despite their age or their health is rendered ineffective by me” (*Veep*, Ep. 5).
The novelty factor for ‘Barrish’ is noted in her comment to a journalist: “if I read half of everything everyone wrote about me I would never get out of bed in the morning” (PA, Ep. 1). Further discussions with the same female journalists about her book on the coming of a “fourth wave of feminism”, titled When Bitches Rule, ‘Barrish’ suggests the books sales were poor because you should never “call a bitch, a bitch…us bitches hate that” (PA, Ep. 1).

Novelty is also found in the positioning of ‘Mac’s’ husband. Demoted as her chief of staff because ‘Mac’ believes it would look like her husband was running the country, he is re-positioned as the “first gentleman”. This puts both in unusual positions with the realisation that protocols are not in place for a man in that role (CC, Ep. 1). The personal aspects of ‘Mac’ in Commander in Chief and ‘Meyer’ in Veep, is the use of emotion. The Republican’s, specifically ‘Templeton’s’ staffer, dismisses the popularity of ‘Mac’ with voters as ‘emotional’. Dismissing ‘Mac’s’ effort to rescue a women about to be executed in Nigeria as ‘Mac’ “acting as a women”, her media spokesperson rejects this, saying she was “acting as a human being” (CC, Ep. 2).

Relationship with family and colleagues generally point to the ‘novelty’ of female elite leadership. Wardrobes, protocols for a ‘first gentleman’, degrading nicknames, a lack of respect, pregnancy and abortion, and references to female anatomy are evident in all three series examined. Politics is framed in each series as a ‘man’s game’ and relies on Machiavellian machinations which are generally ‘performed’ by men. While ‘Barrish’ and ‘Mac’ appear to navigate this at times, how successfully and at what cost is noted.

**Structure and institutions**

The party affiliations of ‘Meyer’ are not revealed, though there is reference to it as a ‘high taxing’ government (Veep, Ep. 2). In episode four, a military hero and the Governor of
Minnesota ‘Danny Chung’ presents his book *The Good Fight* to a ‘Meyer’ staffer with an inscription to ‘Meyer’ (with her name spelt incorrectly) “from an admiring wanna be”. ‘Meyer’ describes it as “Washington bullshit” and asks her staffer if ‘Chung’ is really considering himself as a “credible vice presidential candidate” because he is a “charismatic war hero”. “But the president always sticks with the incumbent Veep?” asks ‘Meyer’ questioningly. The response from one staffer is that he will stay with ‘Meyer’ otherwise it looks like he made a mistake in choosing her (*Veep* Ep. 4).

Travelling to Ohio to endorse a congressman for governor at the president’s request, the candidate rejects the overture saying she is as “welcome as a turd in a hot tub”, and “toxic at the box office” (*Veep* Ep. 8). This is followed with ‘Meyer’ being told of her disapproval rate at 66 percent, she asks “how could that many American’s not like me?” (*Veep*, Ep. 8). Encouraged not to endorse the candidate, but instead attend to shake hands and be seen, ‘Meyer’ responds “that makes me look even weaker”. Going to ‘Meyer’ the candidate asks her to not endorse him because she is “damaged goods” and her “credibility” is in the “toilet” (*Veep* Ep. 8).

Given the minor roles ‘Meyer’ is asked to perform as vice president, posits that she has no political credibility, power and is marginalised. This compares significantly to ‘Barrish’. In a phone call censuring the vice president for attempting to sabotage hostage negotiations, ‘Barrish’ is represented as more powerful than the vice president. In making the decision to run for her party’s nomination for president again, ‘Barrish’s’ rationale is much to do with the structures and institutions of Washington politics, telling her son:

“I am sick to death of the bullshit and the egos and of the men. I am sick of the men. Just one time, just once, I would like to accomplish something in this city without having to spend all my energy navigating the short sighted selfish self-involved and oh so fragile male egos that suck up all the oxygen in this town…it makes me so sick…I could puke
for days. I am running for president…in two years…I am running now” against the president”.

To her ex-husband, ‘Barrish’ confirms that she is going to run for president without him. Her son betrays ‘Barrish’s’ private decision to run for president (PA, Ep. 2). In two scenes we see ‘Barrish’ display autonomy while being betrayed by her son. She believes she can “handle the president” yet her son feels it is a mistake and she should wait until the incumbent president has served his two-terms (PA, Ep. 3). Recognising the threat to his presidency from the popular ‘Barrish’, the president goes to the near retiring Supreme Court Justice, and offers to replace her with ‘Barrish’ as a “pre-emptive strike” (PA, Ep. 3). As a Supreme Court justice, it would mean constitutionally ‘Barrish’ couldn’t run for the presidency. Tipped off ‘Barrish’ goes to ‘Justice Nash’. The following dialogue ensures:

‘Barrish’: “Can’t you see he is playing us against each other”

‘Nash’: “…forget about the politics…and think, consider what you could accomplish [on the Supreme Court]”.

‘Barrish’: “why aren’t we talking about what I could accomplish as president?”

‘Nash’: (on realising ‘Barrish’ is considering to run against the incumbent president) “you’ll be a pariah. You remember your last campaign they branded you as an ambitious bitch…if you challenge the sitting president the voters will see your motives as selfish, I know it’s not fair but ambition looks better on men”.

‘Barrish’: “I don’t care how it looks. I’m doing it because it’s right”.

‘Nash’: (encouraging ‘Barrish’ to take the Supreme Court seat)...this is an opportunity to “tell presidents what they can and can’t do”

‘Barrish’: “I don’t want to be on the Supreme Court. I want to run for president again…It’s different this time. I can’t turn away because it hard, I can’t turn away because it will piss people off… I have to run again, and yes, I have to win” (PA, Ep. 3).
The structural-institutional issues in *Commander in Chief* are complicated by the highly unlikely scenario of an Independent being either vice president or president. The release of a book makes public the former presidents desire to have ‘Mac’ removed (several times) from the role of vice president making her presidency look “illegitimate”. This plot acts in conjunction with ‘Mac’s’ choice of a Democrat as vice president (*CC*, Ep. 7). ‘Templeton’ asks ‘Mac’s’ choice, about the loyalty of the vice president to the president, re-introducing what is framed as ‘Mac’s’ disloyalty to the former president by not resigning before he dies. The resignation letter that ‘Mac’ wrote, honouring the presidents wish for her to resign is released in part, demonstrating her lying (*CC*, Ep. 7).

In the following episode, the issue of loyalty continues. ‘Mac’ receives a videotape of ‘Templeton’ talking in the 1960s in favour of racial segregation. Her husband encourages ‘Mac’ to use the tape to destroy ‘Templeton’. She refuses wanting to take a “principled” decision. But when ‘Templeton’ threatens to out ‘Mac’s’ staffer as having HIV-AIDS, ‘Mac’ rethink the use of the tape (*CC*, Ep. 8). ‘Mac’ confronts ‘Templeton’ over the issue, saying “People make mistakes when they are young”. ‘Templeton’ replies: “But if they go into politics, those mistakes can come back to haunt them…it [politics] is a contact sport. Wear a cup” or a “chest protector (*CC*, Ep. 8). In an act of defiance ‘Mac’ selects a Democrat as her vice president. This outrages the Republican ‘Templeton’ who tells ‘Mac’s’ chief of staff “you tell the girl this is just a dance. She steps on people’s toes, she sits it out. That’s how it goes” (*CC*, Ep. 2). In a ‘Templeton’ flashback with the former president, he counsels the president to remember ‘Mac’ is a “women…it’s just so easy to deal with women if you just remember they’re not men…” (*CC*, Ep. 3).
Discussion

This article set out to consider the social constructs of elite female politicians in television to examine if it mirrors research about women in politics and the perception that politics is a ‘man’s game’. From the above discussion, it is posited that elite American politics in its dramatic form, does reinforce the idea that politics is a ‘man’s game’. Men featured as Machiavellian agents manipulating events to suit their preferred political outcomes and mostly succeeding. The female politicians were represented as wanting to do the ‘right thing’ and generally were framed as more liberal and progressive in their policies. In some instances however the use of female stereotypes to do with mothering, parenting, and emotion weakened some of the more feminist approaches these programs introduced to audiences.

A noted concern was the public/private binary that positioned dramatised female politicians as being hyperdomestic and able to divide their time as president, vice-president or secretary of state to the demands of husbands, lovers, children and parents. Novelty aspects also weakened any counter-narrative about the viability of female elite political leaders, with a focus on trivialities such as their wardrobes and a rushing over of their public careers and former political leadership. Their uniqueness in story lines of pregnancy, accommodating a ‘first gentleman’ and being an Independent proved insightful however they posited the ‘otherness’ of a female president

In television women historically were framed within gendered stereotypes (passive, dependent, submissive, weak, emotional, and irrational), were less visible, and had less power (Joseph Dominick 1979, A.Chris Downs 1981). Representations of women in these frames were a form of ‘symbolic annihilation’ (Tuchman 1978). Today in television women are arguably
more visible and framed in more diverse ways that advance empowerment and independence. In the television political genre, on the surface this appears to be the case. The culture industry, of which television is a part, recognises that all political dramas can’t be about men because the reality is that there are women politicians. It is however in how these women candidates-politicians are represented that has been of interest.

Representation of a female president may excite liberal feminists and their rightful cry for political equality (Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1995). But there is a concern in ‘how’ female political leaders are represented. Evidence from the three television dramas examined in this paper suggest that there are multiple instances where rather than disrupting perceptions about politics as a ‘man’s game’, social constructs of gender were mostly reinforced.
References

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