

On ‘Electability:’

The Influence of Epistemic Injustice on the 2020 Primary Election

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Submitted to the faculty of Cognitive Science in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Yale University
April 24th, 2020

Abstract

In reaction to the election of Trump, ‘electability,’ the perceived likelihood of election to the Office of President, has risen to the forefront of political discourse. However, its prevalence is problematic. The purpose of the present paper is to shed light on the pernicious effects of the concept of electability. Pervasive references to the term in discourse and in the media allow the effects of ‘electability’ to enter the common ground as presuppositions. Drawing on the theory of narrative structure to outline a presidential ‘stock character,’ this paper details how psychological research on the determining factors of ‘electability,’ such as authenticity and likeability, provides empirical evidence of biases tied to its restrictive narrative structure. This paper aims to position ‘electability’ within Miranda Fricker’s framework of epistemic injustice by explaining how our collective understanding of its narrative structure generates a *hermeneutical injustice* or ‘illusion’ that harms candidates who don’t fit the stock character and misleads voters. The injustice of ‘electability’ allows us to understand the fall of female candidates and the success of Joe Biden. Given the troubling consequences of ‘electability’ for the 2020 Democratic primary and American democracy, this work is both timely and important.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
The Narrative Structure of Electability.....	11
Constructing Electability: Determining Factors & Bias.....	17
Is ‘Electability’ a Dogwhistle?.....	32
The Problem and Political Use of Presupposition.....	37
Who’s ‘electable’? A Look at the 2020 Primary Candidates	45
The Hermeneutical Illusion.....	56
Conclusion.....	62
Acknowledgments.....	66
Bibliography.....	67

I. Introduction

During the Republican primary for the 2016 presidential election, Trump was seen as the *least* electable. He was a successful reality television star and real estate mogul, but he was not a politician. Pundits, including the founder of popular polling website FiveThirtyEight and several of its senior writers, thought he and his candidacy were a joke. Harry Enten, a current member of CNN's Politics team and then-writer at FiveThirtyEight, declared that "Trump has a better chance of cameoing in another 'Home Alone' movie with Macaulay Culkin — or playing in the NBA Finals — than winning the Republican nomination."¹ The Huffington Post called Trump's campaign a "sideshow" and relegated coverage of it to their Entertainment section; putting the word campaign in scare quotes to emphasize its illegitimacy.² Not only did pollsters and media outlets consider Trump's candidacy a joke, but his Democratic opponents did too.

Hillary Clinton and her team wanted Trump to win the nomination over experienced politicians such as Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio because of Trump's presumed lack of 'electability.' They thought he would be the easiest to beat in the general election. Agenda items for a Clinton campaign top aides' meeting included "How do we prevent Bush from bettering himself/how do we maximize Trump and others?"³ Clinton's strategy strived to promote candidates like Trump whom they labeled as "Pied Pipers." Another memo distributed by top aides read: "We need to be elevating pied piper candidates so that they are leaders of the pack and tell the press to take [them] seriously."⁴ Although they did not take Trump seriously, they

¹ Harry Enten, "Why Donald Trump Isn't A Real Candidate, In One Chart," *Five Thirty Eight*, June 16th, 2015, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-donald-trump-isnt-a-real-candidate-in-one-chart/>

² Ryan Grim and Danny Shea, "A Note About Our Coverage of Donald Trump's 'Campaign,'" Huffington Post. July 17th, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-note-about-our-coverage-of-donald-trumps-campaign_n_55a8fc9ce4b0896514d0fd66?guccounter=1.

³ Gabriel Debenedetti, "They always wanted Trump," *Politico*, November 7th, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/hillary-clinton-2016-donald-trump-214428>

⁴ Debenedetti, "They always wanted Trump."

needed the press and public to in order for him to win the Republican nomination. A “pied piper” refers to someone who uses charm to entice people to follow him or her, typically to disappointment or misfortune. By labeling these candidates as “pied pipers,” the Clinton team implied that the misfortune underlying the definition of “pied piper” would be the eventual loss of the Republican candidate to Clinton. This strategy worked at first: The Huffington Post moved coverage of Trump’s campaign to the Politics section in December 2015, as he emerged as a legitimate competitor in the Republican primary. Clinton and her team were right about the charm, but they were wrong about the pied piper’s demise. Their strategy backfired.

Contrary to seemingly all polls and pundits, Trump won. The unelectable candidate was elected. However, this paper is not an analysis of how Trump won. It’s about electability, a concept that has risen in relevance since Trump’s election and will last longer than his presidency. Trump’s victory in spite of being hailed as “unelectable” should be the first clue that electability is not the key to success. It is not indicative of a candidate’s actual probability of winning nor of leadership ability. The popularity of ‘electability’ has soared in response to Trump’s election, but our obsession with it is paradoxical. It contradicts the results of the 2016 election and failed every American who did not support Trump, but we still believe in its value.

Electability has never been as important as it is now, at the time of the 2020 Democratic primary election. Google trend data reveals that the frequency of the word in articles is at an all-time high, even compared to the time of the 2016 primary, when Trump’s electability was the topic of discussion.⁵ As the New York Times put it, Trump’s election “seemed to shock the

⁵ “Electability Trends,” *Google Trends*, accessed March 7, 2020.
<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&geo=US&q=electability>.

Democratic base into an electability-induced stupor” for the current election cycle.⁶ The question top of mind for most Democratic and Independent voters is not “Who do I want to vote for?” but “Who can beat Trump?,” the latter of which can also be phrased as “Who is electable?” An Ipsos survey on voter inclinations concluded that nominating a candidate who could beat Trump is the top priority among Democrats and Independents: 82% of participants believed this.⁷ “Who can beat Trump” *is* who people want to vote for. The significance of policy positions and other factors pale in comparison to electability. Answering the question of “Who can beat Trump?,” however, is no small feat. Polling data cannot predict the future, as became clear when Trump beat Clinton in 2016, and neither can anything or anyone else. Consequently, the definition and semantics of electability is obscured. This paper will define electability both generally and in the context of the 2020 election, and will explain how, even when its semantics are elucidated, the term itself obscures reality.

Recognizing the power of a word to obscure reality, and much more, starts with Speech Act Theory. According to J.L. Austin, issuing an utterance constitutes performing an action: speech is action.⁸ It follows from this that words can convince, promise, and debate. They can also objectify, dehumanize, dogwhistle, silence and otherwise harm. These actions are *perlocutionary effects*. If one believes that speech cannot be action, then one is blind to the actions committed by speech. When politicians brush off their words as “mere descriptions,” they deny that speech is action. This can be dangerous in the realm of political speech because politicians can engage in plausible deniability when they are, in fact, doing something nefarious with their words. When

⁶ Shane Goldmacher and Astead W. Herndon. “Elizabeth Warren, Once a Front Runner, Drops out of Presidential Race,” *New York Times*, March 5th, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/us/politics/elizabeth-warren-drops-out.html>

⁷ Chris Jackson and Emily Chen, “Nominating Woman or Minority Come Second to Nominating Candidate Who Can Beat Trump,” *Ipsos*, June 17th, 2019, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-06/daily-beast-gender-topline-2019-06-17-v2.pdf>

⁸ John-Langshaw Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

politicians, the media, and the electorate use the term “electability,” it has pernicious perlocutionary effects that they are largely unaware of. The pernicious power of “electability” is the topic of this paper.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “electable” as “able to be elected, qualified for election.”⁹ This definition is too broad considering that “able” and “qualified” can mean that the person is merely capable of running, or that the person is not just capable, but competent. However, it communicates the basic idea that electability is, or should be, about ability. In practice, it is not. A draft addition from September 2006 updates the definition to: “of a politician or party: having the qualities which make election likely or plausible.”¹⁰ This aligns more closely with how we conceptualize and use “electability” in the present day. Estimating what is “likely or plausible” is difficult. Early primaries and caucuses reflect the preferences of candidates in particular states, and polls reflect the current standing of candidates according to those who responded to the poll. Yet, the polls do more than just report, they “shape the very course of the campaign.”¹¹ Voters who read the polls are more inclined to vote for candidates doing well. If electability is not actually who is most likely to win, then what is it? The draft definition’s mention of “qualities” is important, and a central, though self-referential, quality is the perception of a candidate as likely to be elected. “It’s not facts- but perception- that drive voter behavior.”¹²

⁹ “Electability,” Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/60218?redirectedFrom=electability#eid5817063>

¹⁰ Oxford English Dictionary, “Electability.”

¹¹ Barbara Burrell, “Likeable? Effective Commander in Chief? Polling on Candidate Traits in the “Year of the Presidential Woman,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 41, no. 4 (2008): 747-52. www.jstor.org/stable/20452306.

¹² Alex Seitz-Wald, “Electability is the Most Important, Least Understood Word in the 2020 Race,” *NBCNews*, June 23rd, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/electability-eye-beholder-what-hell-do-we-actually-know-about-n1020576>

Attempting to answer “Who can beat Trump?” requires thinking about the opinions of our fellow Americans, not just our own opinions. This is especially true if we don’t believe that our personal choice will be the same as other people’s. If the goal is to end up with a Democratic nominee capable of beating Trump, then we will vote for the candidate that we think other people will vote for. ‘Electability’ is about a candidate’s perceived chances of winning. It has little to do with the candidate’s actual odds of winning or how qualified he or she is. Therefore, when voters prioritize ‘electability’ as they cast their ballots, they not only vote for someone they don’t necessarily believe in, but they vote for someone whose ability to win is not even ensured.

Our concept of electability is also flawed due to how we determine the other qualities that “make election likely or plausible,” and how we visualize what a president should be.¹³ The qualities we look for in a president, including competence, authenticity, likeability, are a product of the nature of the position and the narrative structure established by those who have held it since the 18th century. This paper investigates the extent to which these qualities engender prejudice by operating within a narrow narrative structure and how this narrative structure enables the term “electability” to constitute an epistemic injustice.

In Miranda Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice*, she explains how not having a concept can be harmful and wrongful. Our lives are influenced, for better and for worse, by how we understand and interpret our experiences. Therefore, lacking a term for an experience detracts from our ability to process it. We are thus wronged in our capacity as knowers. This is what Fricker calls a *hermeneutical injustice*. Hermeneutical injustices arise when someone has a significant area of their social experience obscured from understanding due to prejudicial flaws in shared resources

¹³ Oxford English Dictionary, “Electability.”

for social interpretation.¹⁴ This form of injustice is not perpetrated by an agent, but by a hierarchical society in which the disadvantaged group is hermeneutically marginalized.

She illustrates her theory of hermeneutical injustice with the example of sexual harassment. Women who were victims of groping and other inappropriate, nonconsensual sexual advances before and in the 1970s had no word for their experience; they were hermeneutically marginalized. They were prevented from understanding a significant area of their social experience, and therefore also from connecting with people with similar experiences and healing. In Fricker's words, their "hermeneutical disadvantage renders [them] unable to make sense of [their] ongoing mistreatment, and this in turn prevents [them] from protesting it, let alone securing effective measures to stop it."¹⁵ The coining of the term "sexual harassment" unified the range of experiences that fall under it and enabled women with those experiences to put a label on them and come together. Repairing the hermeneutical injustice helped them heal as well as seek justice. Once the term had been coined, it could then be written into law, enabling women to pursue legal action against their harassers.

Fricker's argument focuses on the damage done by *lacking* a concept. The main point of this paper is that the *possession* of a concept can be equally damaging. Following Fricker's framework, 'electability,' as a concept, puts people at a cognitive disadvantage, and thereby constitutes a hermeneutical injustice. I argue that our concept of the word electability obscures at least as much as it illuminates. It distorts our understanding of social reality. This is dangerous because it impacts American politics, in particular the current presidential primary and upcoming election, and prevents progress in the long-term. The injustice of 'electability' is three-pronged.

¹⁴ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & The Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 147-155.

¹⁵ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 151.

First, the construction of ‘electability’ and its narrative structure are rooted in bias. Second, its prevalence in discourse allows bias to pervade the common ground and influence voting decisions. Finally, the ultimate flaw of ‘electability’ is that it *presupposes* society is stagnant and the future is fated to mirror the past, and our possession of this concept materializes these presuppositions.

II. The Narrative Structure of Electability

Narrative structure is an efficient way to store memories based on the way our brain organizes information. Rather than storing discrete concepts, we store stories, connecting information for ease of retrieval. However, the convenience of narrative can imbue words with pernicious perlocutionary effects. Once stored in our brain, narrative becomes much more than a mere form of memory storage. It is, according to Jack Balkin, a “method of framing and organizing experience, a method for indexing and retrieving information, a method of internalizing cultural expectations, and a method of explaining deviations from cultural expectations.”¹⁶ We glean narrative structure from our imperfect world, and, in turn, it shapes how we see the world.

Narratives rest on understandings about what is canonical and expected.¹⁷ This applies to electability as well. Electability asks the question: who do we expect *will be elected*? It doesn’t ask who we *want* to elect. In forming expectations and attempting to predict the future, we look to the past. Narrative thinking “bestows legitimacy and authority on the expected,” reinforcing the canonical as the correct.¹⁸ It is difficult, as well as subjective, to judge whether a candidate was the “correct” choice for president and for the country. The narrative of electability bypasses this consideration, equating what’s right to what is expected and to the winner, the elected. The legitimizing function of narrative thinking reveals how ‘electability’ can impede political progress. By reinforcing the canonical, narrative thinking limits the opportunity for those outside it to succeed. This limitation can occur at each stage of women and people of color aspiring to the presidency, starting with choosing to run. Moving forward as a nation necessitates that we

¹⁶ Jack M. Balkin, *Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 189-90.

¹⁷ Balkin, *Cultural Software*, 191.

¹⁸ Balkin, *Cultural Software*, 191.

elect people who are different from those we have elected in the past, but ‘electability’ hinders that.

Problematically, the “canonical and expected” can also be thought of as the ‘normal.’ The concept of ‘normal’ operates in the same manner as ‘electability,’ established by and endorsing a predetermined narrative. The narrative of ‘normalcy’ is reflected in the past, and in statistics. Bear and Knobe (2016) presents evidence that our understanding of what is normal is informed by the “descriptively [and statistically] average” as well as what we believe to be “prescriptively ideal.”¹⁹ This relationship between the ideal and the average reveals how descriptive truths yield prescriptive, and moral, judgements. The abnormal are perceived as “weird,” and this affects views on everything from homosexuality to electability. It should not be “ideal” to have a male president purely because we have never had a female one before. Yet, an ‘electable’ candidate is a ‘normal’ president, a president we’ve seen before time and time again, and this influences our prescriptive view of what a president *should* look like. ‘Normal’ is also self-reinforcing: society is built for the ‘normal’ and makes life more difficult for the abnormal. Thus, the abnormal cannot become normal. The narrative of ‘electability’ is intertwined with that of ‘normal.’ Although it would be inaccurate to say that all narratives are dangerous, ‘electability’ is not the only concept with a narrative structure that yields pernicious effects.

Our judgments of human character are also organized around narratives. These personal narratives rely on a pool of stock characters. Our culture has a “well-developed set of stock characters — the miser, the ladies’ man, the clinging mother”, and the president.²⁰ Stock characters form as “a template for organizing and giving meaning to our encounters with others,”

¹⁹ Adam Bear and Joshua Knobe, “Normality: Part descriptive, part prescriptive,” *Cognition* (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2016.10.024>.

²⁰ Balkin, *Cultural Software*, 198.

whether those encounters are direct or, when it comes to the president, filtered through media coverage and historical knowledge.²¹ While this sounds convenient, it is also restricting. Framing individuals as *fitting* a certain stock character can have a positive effect on their future development and, consequently, their future success. Americans frame how we think about “who is electable” in terms of what the stock character of a president is. When it comes to the presidency, fitting the stock character benefits a candidate. The candidate who fits the stock character of President is easy to consider “electable,” and therefore has an easier path to the presidency.

Our mental reliance on stock characters, however, becomes a problem when someone does *not* fit. The effect on future development and success is negative, rather than positive. Stock characters, and thus narratives, are inextricably connected to ethnic, racial, and gendered stereotypes.²² Those who don’t fit the stock character are those who don’t match the stereotype of an American president as white and male. Thus, instantly, the women and people of color who run for president have trouble fitting into our narrative structure of what a president is. While black men can begin to reconfigure these narrative structures thanks to Obama’s election, women have not had the same opportunity.

While we can use narrative structure as a heuristic device to reconfigure old expectations in light of new experiences, such as women running for president, this can also backfire. When Hillary Clinton, the only example of a female presidential nominee in the general election, lost to Donald Trump in 2016, it fit within the narrative structure of men as presidents, despite her winning the popular vote. Trump’s unexpected win legitimized the expectation that our president should be male. The Director of the Rutgers’ Center for American Women and Politics

²¹ Balkin, *Cultural Software*, 198.

²² Balkin, *Cultural Software*, 198.

summarized this by saying that “Hillary Clinton didn’t win — so the conventional wisdom, which starts to feed on itself, is, ‘Well, we’d better just elect the thing we’ve always had,’ which is white men.”²³ While a Clinton win could have begun to rewrite the narrative structure of a presidential archetype, her loss reinforced the sexist structure in place. Hillary made history by being the Democratic nominee, and although this may have paved the way for more women to run for president in 2020, these women now have to answer for Hillary’s loss. Men have never had to answer for a prior candidate’s loss: “Dozens of men have lost presidential campaigns, and so far in every instance but one, Americans selected another man to try again the next time, their maleness blessedly unburdened with concerns about electability.”²⁴ The burden of answering for someone else’s loss is an additional roadblock on the path to the presidency for the women who campaigned in the 2020 primary and will campaign in the future. The presidential archetype will only change to include women when a woman wins.

As stated in a Vox article on this year’s election primary, “the expectation of who can win is inextricably wrapped up in the knowledge of who has won.”²⁵ Every single U.S. president has been male, and all but one have been white. It’s no wonder the public finds it so difficult to believe a woman is “electable.” In the 2008 primary, Obama wasn’t considered particularly electable.²⁶ In the same manner that questioning female electability has sexist presuppositions, questioning Obama’s electability has racist presuppositions. Yet, he was elected and served as President for eight years: a small step toward a more diverse and inclusive presidential narrative.

²³ Maggie Astor, “The Word Female Presidential Candidates Have Been Hearing Over and Over,” *New York Times*, January 14th, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/14/us/politics/woman-president.html>

²⁴ Pema Levy, “Trump’s Greatest Trick Was Convincing Voters That Women Can’t Win,” *Mother Jones*, January 30th, 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/01/elizabeth-warren-amy-klobuchar-electability/>

²⁵ Tara Golshan, “A new poll shows how sexism and electability collide in 2020,” *Vox*, June 17th, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/6/17/18681964/poll-sexism-electability-2020-warren-trump-harris>

²⁶ Massimo Durham/Calabresi, “Obama’s ‘Electability’ Code for Race?,” *Time*, May 6, 2008, <http://content.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1737725,00.html>

However, one in forty-five is just that: one. The Office of President is the highest office in the U.S., and therefore it carries more weight than any other legislative or executive position in which women have flourished. Although female representation in Congress and the House has increased, rewriting the narrative structure of those positions by having more women in Congress and the House cannot change the presidential archetype.

The creation of new narratives can enhance a candidate's 'electability,' as was the case with Trump in 2016. Trump's campaign slogan was "Make America Great Again." Asserting a desire to return to "Golden-Age" America appealed to countless voters who wanted a change. The "when" remains undefined, except for a comment by Steve Bannon that the Trump era would be "as exciting as the 1930s."²⁷ Most people would argue that America was not great in the 1930s, a time period which included the Great Depression. Determining exactly when America was great, however, is not as important as the establishment of a narrative that America was great, is no longer, and perhaps would be again under Trump. Trump's construction of a "mythic past," one that did not truly exist but was supposedly glorious, gave credence to his vision for America by evoking nostalgia.²⁸ Creating a narrative of prior greatness facilitated Trump's rise, underscoring the power such carefully constructed stories hold.

The past that 'electability' harkens back to is not mythic in the sense that it is false. It is mythic because it glorifies past leaders for being leaders and ignores the details of previous presidents' successes and failures. 'Electability' does not care what the president did, information that the majority of the American public cannot easily recall. It cares who the president was. It is a backwards-looking concept, as it compels us to care about what presidents looked like in the past rather than what they could look like in the future if we voted for

²⁷ Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works* (New York: Random House, 2018), xiii-xiv.

²⁸ Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, 5.

candidates we believed in. Backwards is not the direction in which we should be looking, or going.

If 2016 should teach us anything, it is that an ‘unelectable’ candidate can come out on top. Trump was a real estate mogul and reality TV star with no political experience, a joke to pundits and opponents. The only parts of the presidential narrative structure he fit were demographic: Trump is a white male. Voters who want Trump out of office should be cognizant of the dangers of “electability.” While looking to the most “electable” candidate to save us from another four years of Trump may appeal to the demographics of ‘electability,’ it’s illogical. The convenience and comfort of narrative structure are a trap. Narrative thinking begets a strict conceptualization of ‘electability’ that misleads candidates and voters as to who can win a presidential election. Trump was able to establish a new narrative of a mythic past that helped him defeat the numerous other white, male Republican candidates in the 2016 primary, and then defeat Clinton. The candidates of the diverse 2020 primary, however, cannot rewrite the deep-seated narrative structure of ‘electability.’

III. Constructing Electability: Determining Factors & Bias

As Kate Manne says, “electability is not a static social fact; it’s one we construct.”²⁹ Our construction of electability relies on our perception of “the qualities which make election likely or plausible,” as the Oxford English Dictionary’s suggested definition states.³⁰ These qualities include competence, authenticity, likeability, rationality, and more. Psychological studies have shown how many of these qualities are subject to bias. Biases that impact who is competent, likeable, and rational, compound to impact who is electable. “All candidates, regardless of sex, want voters to regard them as credible on a wide range of issues and to be perceived as possessing the best personal qualities,” but some candidates are systematically disadvantaged when it comes to the perception of these “best personal qualities.”³¹

Firstly, ‘electable’ presidential candidates are expected to have adequate political experience. While this is logical, it also means that the underrepresentation of women at every rung of the political ladder reinforces the patriarchal structure. There are simply more men with political experience. The rising number of women in the House and Senate reduce the bias in this factor of ‘electability,’ but it cannot rewrite its narrative structure.

Name recognition also contributes to ‘electability’ because the majority of Americans are not politically engaged enough to be familiar with every presidential candidate. People are more likely to vote for a candidate they’ve heard of than research candidates they are unfamiliar with in order to vote for them.³² “Recognition signals *viability*,” the likelihood that a candidate will

²⁹ Ezra Klein, “Kate Manne on why female candidates get ruled ‘unelectable’ so quickly,” *Vox*, April 23rd, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/4/23/18512016/elizabeth-warren-electability-amy-klobuchar-2020-primary-female-candidates>

³⁰ “Electability,” Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/60218?redirectedFrom=electability#eid5817063>

³¹ Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, *Women on the Run: Gender, Media and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 7.

³² Cindy D. Kam and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, “Name Recognition and Candidate Support,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (2013): 971-86, www.jstor.org/stable/23496668.

win the nomination, because individuals believe that the majority of other people will vote for candidates they know. It therefore also signals ‘electability,’ the perceived likelihood of winning the general election.³³ The goal of campaigning is to increase candidates’ viability by increasing their visibility.

Political ideology is also an element of ‘electability.’ Pundits are strongly attached to the theory that moderates are more electable, even when a more extreme candidate like Trump wins. This is because the majority of the electorate identifies as moderate regardless of party affiliation.³⁴ Voters cluster around the center and, returning to the concept of normalcy, this is perceived as ideal. Pundits worry that democratic candidates who are “too” progressive may isolate the majority of Democratic voters, while progressive voters will still vote for a moderate candidate. While candidates choose to be either moderate or progressive based on their beliefs, not their gender or race, female progressive candidates are evaluated more negatively than their male counterparts as a result of gender bias in other factors of electability.

When thinking about desirable qualities in a president, and what the stock character of a President is, rationality is one of the first attributes that comes to mind. As the holder of the highest office in the nation, the president must think about decisions logically because the decisions they make affect the entire population of the United States and often people outside of it as well. Pavco-Giaccia (2019) provides compelling evidence that our conception of rationality is gendered. Analyzing data from four studies and 900 participants, the paper concludes that *reason* is semantically associated with the concept *male*, while *feeling* is preferentially

³³ Kam and Zechmeister, “Name Recognition and Candidate Support.”

³⁴ Bill Scher, “The Democratic Party is the Party of Moderates,” *RealClearPolitics*, March 25th, 2019, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2019/03/25/the_democratic_party_is_the_party_of_moderates_139846.html

semantically associated with *female*.³⁵ The subconscious labelling of men as more reasonable, or rational, gives them an automatic advantage. Conversely, the association between “female” and “feeling” has negative implications for women aspiring to any position of power, particularly the presidency. It is assumed first that women are emotional by nature and, second, that this nature impedes their ability to make rational decisions, an important task of the presidency. The possible efficacy of empathy in presidency is not taken into account, nor is the origin of this semantic association in stereotypes. If the study was run again to associate *feeling* or *reason* with *president*, the answer would surely be reason. Rationality is a determinant of competence, and therefore electability.

While rationality is associated with men, likeability is associated with women, though for the wrong reasons. As a dimension of ‘electability,’ likeability, or a lack thereof, is rarely taken into consideration for men, but women have to be both likeable and competent. The “incongruity of normative female roles (warm, nurturing) with characteristics perceived necessary for professional success (independence, assertiveness) means that women are either seen as likeable, but incompetent, or as competent, but unlikeable.”³⁶ This traps women in a double bind. To be seen as competent and having the qualities deemed important for presidential success, women stray from their stereotypical gender role. At the same time, they must find a way to conform to gender roles in order to be perceived as likeable. It is only by achieving both that women can succeed. Social narratives, including that of electability, reinforce gendered expectations of appropriate behavior for women.³⁷

³⁵ Olivia Pavco-Giaccia et al., “Rationality is Gendered,” *PsyArXiv*, (October 2019).

³⁶ Andrea Kupfer Schneider et al., “Likeability v. Competence: The Impossible Choice Faced by Female Politicians, Attenuated by Lawyers,” *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy*, 2010: 363-384.

³⁷ Kupfer Schneider et al., “Likeability v. Competence: The Impossible Choice Faced by Female Politicians, Attenuated by Lawyers.”

Role congruity theory explains why this incongruity makes women seem less suitable for leadership positions than men. When social perceivers hold a stereotype about a social group that is incongruent with the attributes thought to be required for success in certain classes of social roles, prejudice emerges.³⁸ The female stereotype paints women as affectionate, kind, sympathetic, and gentle, while men are assertive, ambitious, independent, and confident.³⁹ The attributes considered important for the role of president are more congruent with the latter, “male” characteristics. Eagly and Karau (2002) propose that there are two forms of prejudice that result from role congruity theory. Firstly, women will be perceived less favorably than men as potential leaders and secondly, leadership behavior will be evaluated less favorably when enacted by a woman. In the presidential primary, female ambition is perceived negatively, as attempts to assert their qualifications for the position are seen as boastful.

Macrae, Hewstone, and Griffiths (1993) presented evidence that people rely more on stereotypical beliefs when their cognitive resources are limited, such as when they experience information overload.⁴⁰ The presidential primary absolutely constitutes information overload. This primary in particular started with the largest, and most diverse, field of candidates in history.⁴¹ Presented with too many options, voters are primed to turn to their stereotypical beliefs to determine who is “electable.”

According to a report by the Center for American Women and Politics on the 2016 election, “women, as political outsiders, have to “act” the part of the candidate and officeholder in order to

³⁸ Alice H. Eagly and Steven J. Karau, “Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders,” *Psychological Review* 109, no. 3 (2002).

³⁹ Eagly and Karau, “Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders.”

⁴⁰ C. Neil Macrae, Miles Hewstone, and Riana J. Griffiths, “Processing load and memory for stereotype-based information,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 23, no. 1 (1993): 77-87.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420230107>

⁴¹ Harry Enten, “The 2020 Democratic Field Is the Most Diverse Ever,” *CNN*, January 27, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/27/politics/2020-democratic-field-diversity/index.html>

meet both the masculine credentials for the job and the feminine credentials of being a “real” woman,” while being authentically male also means meeting the expectations of executive office.”⁴² The stereotypical female gender role is incongruous with the role of a political candidate and officeholder, while the stereotypical male gender role is congruous. Kate Manne separates men and women into “human beings” and “human givers,” respectively.⁴³ Women, the givers, are “held to owe many distinctly human capacities to a suitable man and his children: to offer love, sex, attention, affection and admiration.”⁴⁴ Men get to just “be.” Female candidates, for President or any position of power, must be “‘real’ women” and “givers” in the capacities listed by Manne while at the same time meeting the qualifications of the job. The qualifications for President arguably conflict with those of being a “human giver,” as noted by the presence of the likeability and competence double bind, and role congruity theory.

When women “act” the part of the officeholder for an office they are deemed unsuitable for in order to make up for the perceived incongruity, they are frequently accused of being inauthentic. This is detrimental to their candidacy, since authenticity is also a factor of electability. In order to succeed, candidates need to be perceived as ‘real’ and ‘down-to-earth.’ Voters want the president to be a regular person, like them, even though the presidency is not a regular job.

Although one would think dishonesty would be deemed inauthentic, candidates who lie, such as Trump, are sometimes considered “authentically appealing.” Hahl, Kim, and Sivan (2018) suggest that lying is acceptable when voters believe the political system is suffering from a crisis

⁴² Kelly Dittmar, “Finding Gender in Election 2016: Lessons from Presidential Gender Watch,” *Issuu*, May 17, 2017, https://issuu.com/presidentialgenderwatch/docs/pgw_finding_gender_report_may2017.

⁴³ Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 175.

⁴⁴ Manne, *Down Girl*, 301.

of legitimacy.”⁴⁵ In such a crisis, liars are perceived as “authentic champion[s]” of this group of voters because they appear to be “bravely speaking a deep and otherwise suppressed truth.”⁴⁶ They come across as highly committed to the interests of voters who think the political system is flawed. Trump appeals to voters who believe just that, bolstering their beliefs with his narrative of a mythic past. As a result, he was perceived as authentic in 2016, and to many still is. In establishing electability through authenticity, it is important to be authentic to oneself and one’s constituency, but not necessarily to the truth. The charm of lying, however, presents a double standard in that it does not seem to work for women. Elizabeth Warren has engaged in bald-faced lying, but rather than being hailed as an “authentic champion,” she is perceived as disingenuous, even by people within the Democratic party.⁴⁷

The question “Who would you rather grab a beer with?” is often posed to voters to gauge the authenticity and likeability of a candidate. The hypothetical is unrealistic, but it encourages voters to think about possible future presidents as ‘regular people’ whom they might get a drink with. Although the proliferation of this question goes back to at least 2000, and therefore predates prominent female presidential candidates, the question is biased against women because beer is generally perceived as a “man’s drink.”⁴⁸ As more women run for President, the question has not changed, and the gender-coding of alcoholic beverages remains. Even when rephrased as

⁴⁵ Oliver Hahl, Minjae Kim, and Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan, “The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue: Proclaiming the Deeper Truth about Political Illegitimacy,” *American Sociological Review* 83, 1 (2018): 1-33. doi: 10.1177/0003122417749632.

⁴⁶ Hahl, Kim, and Sivan, “The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue: Proclaiming the Deeper Truth about Political Illegitimacy,” 3.

⁴⁷ Washington Examiner staff, “Elizabeth Warren’s fibbing is forming a pattern,” *Washington Examiner*, December 28th, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/editorials/elizabeth-warrens-lies-are-a-pattern>.

⁴⁸ Jessica L. Fugitt and Lindsay S. Ham, “Beer for “brohood:” Masculinity confirmation through alcohol use behaviors in men,” *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors: Journal of the Society of Psychologists in Addictive Behaviors* 32, 3 (2018): 358-364. doi:10.1037/adb0000351. In their study, men primed to believe their masculinity was threatened consumed more beer. The “consumption of alcohol by men in social contexts may be strongly motivated by the desire to confirm masculine status.” This explains the association of beer, and even alcohol in general, with men.

“Who would you rather grab a drink with?”, the question works in favor of male candidates who don’t have to balance appearing likeable with appearing competent.

Elizabeth Warren tried to combat this bias and position herself as a candidate whom voters would want to have a beer with. In an Instagram Live appearance soon after announcing her candidacy, Warren said, “Hold on a sec, I’m gonna get me a beer,” and returned with a Michelob Ultra.⁴⁹ Echoing role congruity theory, this action and utterance were instantly criticized as incongruous with Warren’s position as an erudite Harvard Law Professor. Her nonstandard use of the pronoun “me” to refer back to the subject, instead of an argument, is called a personal dative, and is a feature of grammatical diversity common to “southern and Appalachian dialects of English, also extending into the South Midlands region.”⁵⁰ This includes Oklahoma, where Warren lived from birth until age sixteen. As argued by Yale linguist Laurence A. Horn, use of the personal dative is “accepted non-judgmentally within the in-group of users while serving as shibboleth to impugn outsiders who employ it.”⁵¹ Despite the authenticity of her vernacular to her Southern roots, she was perceived as an outsider, and impugned accordingly by the media. The act of grabbing a beer, incongruous with stereotypical female gender roles, compounded with the nonstandard utterance of “I’m gonna get me a beer,” contributed to the perception of Warren as disingenuous. Thus, Warren finds herself in another double bind, this time of authenticity: “if Warren harks back to her own upbringing in her language use, she gets called inauthentic, but if she purges her speech of any nonstandard idioms, she’d be seen as lacking a populist touch.”⁵² She is caught between the language of her high-level education and the

⁴⁹ Ben Zimmer, “Elizabeth Warren and the Down-to-Earth Trap,” *The Atlantic*, January 5th, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/01/why-elizabeth-warrens-beer-moment-fell-flat/579544/>.

⁵⁰ Zimmer, “Elizabeth Warren and the Down-to-Earth Trap.”

⁵¹ Laurence R. Horn, “‘I love me some him’: The landscape of non-argument datives,” *Empirical Issues in Syntax and Semantics* 7 (2008), <http://www.cssp.cnrs.fr/eiss7/horn-eiss7.pdf>, 177.

⁵² Zimmer, “Elizabeth Warren and the Down-to-Earth Trap.”

language of her hometown, as well as her desire to be the candidate voters want to “grab a beer with” and voters’ inability to see her as someone who would actually drink beer and as someone whom they might want to drink with. The perception of women such as Warren as inauthentic, and as liars, can also be attributed to *testimonial injustice*.

Testimonial injustice, a different form of epistemic injustice explained by Fricker, upholds the perceived incompetence of women. This form of epistemic injustice arises “due to systemic biases in the economy of credibility” that generate *credibility deficits* for subordinate group members.⁵³ A person may be subject to this form of injustice in two ways. First, she may be “taken to be less *competent* than she ought to be – that is, as less likely to know of what she speaks, or be justified in believing it, than is warranted.”⁵⁴ Second, a person may be perceived as “less *trustworthy* – that is, less likely to be sincere or honest in her claims.”⁵⁵

Credibility deficits lead to testimonial injustice, and also “buttress dominant group members’ current social position.”⁵⁶ In the context of the presidential primary, candidates are in the dominant group if they fit the narrative structure of electability — white, straight, male, and typically moderate — and these candidates are elevated when those in the non-dominant group are considered incompetent or insincere. Fricker’s primary example is the treatment of Tom Robinson in Harper Lee’s “How to Kill a Mockingbird,” a black man falsely convicted of raping a white woman: Mayella Ewell. His racial identity is subordinate in society, and thus he is not believed when he denies assaulting her to an all-white jury. He is subject to a “identity-prejudicial credibility deficit,” which Fricker calls the central case of testimonial injustice.⁵⁷ In

⁵³ Manne, *Down Girl*, 185.

⁵⁴ Manne, *Down Girl*, 186.

⁵⁵ Manne, *Down Girl*, 186.

⁵⁶ Manne, *Down Girl*, 194.

⁵⁷ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 28.

contemporary society, women are consistently subordinated to men, and are thus put at an identity-prejudicial credibility deficit. The representation of women as incompetent strengthens patriarchal social structure.

Among the many 2020 primary candidates, Elizabeth Warren's competence should be undeniable. A law professor for over thirty years, Warren is considered an expert in bankruptcy law.⁵⁸ She advised the National Bankruptcy Review in the 1990s and proposed the formation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau after the 2008 recession. As a two term Massachusetts senator, she has plenty of political experience. Her approach to policymaking is serious; she had a detailed plan for everything, but "Warren has a plan for that" was rarely understood as praise. She was punished for her plans rather than rewarded. When she offered evidence of her competence, she was called "condescending."⁵⁹ When she asserted that Bernie Sanders told her she could not beat Trump, Warren was instantly accused of lying "for political advantage" although there was nothing for her to gain.⁶⁰ She was perceived as less trustworthy than Bernie. Warren is just one example of a female candidate whom the American people hesitate to trust and to think of as competent. Female candidates such as Warren are subjected to testimonial injustice due to an identity-prejudicial credibility deficit, and they are perceived as inauthentic when they attempt to call out sexism.

The perception of female competence, or lack thereof, is also impacted by the extent to which women are perceived as seeking power. Okimoto and Brescoll (2009) explains how competence evaluations are "biased against female politicians exhibiting power-seeking

⁵⁸ CNN Editorial Research, "Elizabeth Warren Fast Facts," CNN News, January 9th, 2015, ed. March 24th, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/01/09/us/elizabeth-warren-fast-facts/index.html>

⁵⁹ Megan Garber, "America Punished Elizabeth Warren for her Competence," *The Atlantic*, March 5th, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/03/america-punished-elizabeth-warren-her-competence/607531/>.

⁶⁰ Alex Thompson, Trent Spiner, and Stephanie Murray, "'He totally said it' or 'Complete BS'? Sanders and Warren Voters Dig In," *Politico*, January 20th, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/20/warren-sanders-2020-101276>.

intentions, whereas those same power goals increased the perceived competence of male politicians.”⁶¹ Ambition is a trait commonly regarded as positive and crucial to success, but this seems to only benefit men. The Okimoto and Brescoll study also measured voting preference, finding that voting preferences for female candidates are negatively influenced by power-seeking intentions (actual or perceived), while voting preferences for male candidates are unaffected.⁶² This confirms the relationship between competence perceptions and voting preference, and the prejudice against women. Attributes that should count in their favor, like ambition, are understood as threats. When women are ambitious and seek power, they are punished: they are evaluated as less competent and people are less interested in voting for them.

This punishment comes not only in the form of testimonial injustice, but also in the form of moral outrage, defined as “anger, contempt, and disgust emotions evoked by the intentional violation of cherished moral principles.”⁶³ Backlash against women seeking power emerges not merely from normative deviations, but from the violation of communal prescriptions. In other words, “people react negatively to counterstereotypical women because they violate principled behavior, not just because they are unaccustomed to seeing them in a particular role.”⁶⁴ Women are punished not only for violating expectations of how they *do* behave, but also how they *should* behave according to stereotypical gender roles. Moral outrage is problematic in its own right, and also for its role in decreasing willingness to vote for power-seeking female politicians.⁶⁵ This implies that the increased representation of women in positions of power may not pave the path for other women as we might expect it to. Changing the narrative structure of electability

⁶¹ Tyler G. Okimoto and Victoria L. Brescoll, “The Price of Power: Power Seeking and Backlash against Female Politicians,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36, no. 7 (July 2010), 930, doi:10.1177/0146167210371949.

⁶² Okimoto and Brescoll, “The Price of Power.”

⁶³ Okimoto and Brescoll, “The Price of Power,” 927.

⁶⁴ Okimoto and Brescoll, “The Price of Power,” 931.

⁶⁵ Okimoto and Brescoll, “The Price of Power,” 931.

necessitates having a woman in the oval office, and when we finally do, we can expect her to be met with moral outrage.

The response to a female presidency would include moral outrage as well as *moral licensing*, the phenomenon that initial moral behavior may license problematic later behavior. The initial moral behavior in this case is voting for a female candidate. This licensing entails that we may only ever have one female president. Effron, Cameron, and Monin (2009) finds evidence that endorsing Obama licensed favoring white people as candidates for a police force job. Expressing support for Obama granted people “moral credentials,” and we can expect a similar effect to occur with the election of the United States’ first female president.⁶⁶ People who vote for her may consider that action as proof that they are not sexist. This reduces concern about appearing prejudiced and allows them to confidently choose not to vote for a female candidate again. We hope that the eventual election of a female president will help rewrite the narrative structure of ‘electability’ and open the door to the election of more women in the future, but the reality is that her election may “give the status quo the justification to close the door again.”⁶⁷ This justification could derive from both the moral credentials of electing her, and from less-than-favorable evaluations of her leadership ability, one of the prejudices Eagly and Karau (2002) suggests result from role congruity theory. If this is the case, the United States will join

⁶⁶ Daniel A. Effron, Jessica S. Cameron, and Benoît Monin, “Endorsing Obama licenses favoring Whites,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45, no. 3 (2009): 590-593, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2009.02.001>. The election of America’s first black president, Barack Obama, may also turn out to be our only black president due to moral licensing. In 2014, former Republican nomination candidate Michelle Bachmann stated that there was a “cachet about having an African-American president because of guilt.” American guilt about the historic treatment of African-Americans meant that, following Bachmann’s logic and that of moral licensing, voting for Obama was the “moral credential” that relieved Americans of their guilt. This moral credential also exempts Obama’s supporters from voting for future African-American candidates, or other candidates outside the presidential stock character. See Matt Vasilogambros and National Journal, “Woman Who Ran for President Says U.S. Not Ready for Female President,” *The Atlantic*, February 20th, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/woman-who-ran-for-president-says-us-not-ready-for-female-president/437562/>.

⁶⁷ Malcolm Gladwell, “The Lady Vanishes,” *Revisionist History*, June 16th, 2016, <http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/01-the-lady-vanishes>

the ranks of numerous countries that have had one, and only one, female leader, including Brazil, Germany, Costa Rica, Poland, Latvia, Ecuador, and Canada.⁶⁸

The prejudices of role congruity theory and other aspects of ‘electability’ are biased as a result of their association with stereotypical gender roles. Voice pitch, the “highness” or “lowness” of a voice as influenced by fundamental frequency (F0), is also a determinant of electability, and its bias has little to do with the roles women are supposed to play. Men and women both “prefer to vote for male and female candidates with lower-pitched voices,” which tells us that this bias not a direct result of pre-existing gender biases.⁶⁹ Research has shown that individuals with lower voices are more successful at winning elections because they are perceived as superior leaders.⁷⁰ Klofstad and Anderson (2018) ran an observational study on members of Congress in which they asked participants to respond to persuasive policy statements uttered by speakers with varied pitched voices. The study also assessed the leadership ability of the Congress members by analyzing position, influence, legislative activity, and “sizzle/fizzle,” a more subjective judgement based on scandals, popularity, and relevant relationships. Comparing measures of leadership ability to pitch, results revealed that pitch does not predict ability.

There is solid empirical evidence for our preference for lower voices. Voice pitch is determined by the amount of testosterone present in an individual and testosterone presence in males is greater than in females; therefore, lower voices are typical of men. Typically, pitch goes unnoticed as a factor of electability because it is subconscious. We don’t actively think about the

⁶⁸ Gladwell, “The Lady Vanishes.”

⁶⁹ Casey A. Klofstad and Rindy C. Anderson, “Voice pitch predicts electability, but does not signal leadership ability,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 39, no. 3 (May 2018): 349-54, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1090513817301770>.

⁷⁰ Klofstad and Anderson, “Voice pitch predicts electability, but does not signal leadership ability.”

pitch of a candidate. Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes, however, actively thinks about her own pitch. She purposefully lowered her voice in order to be taken more seriously as a CEO, which, like President, is a male-coded position. Although she is not a politician, she recognized that pitch is correlated with perceptions of competence. There is no means of determining whether Holmes would have been less successful if she spoke with her real pitch. However, her story illustrates a dangerous bias in competence impressions. If female politicians tried to follow in Holmes' lead, they would risk the truth being revealed and impairing their likeability and authenticity, which would likely prove more damaging than the benefit of a lower voice.

The influence of pitch on 'electability' is one more factor that contributes to the election of men instead of women. This is problematic not only because it reinforces the underrepresentation of women in politics, but also because pitch is entirely unrelated to ability, which should serve as the foundation of electability. Unlike qualities such as competence or rationality, which should be rooted in ability but are biased due to stereotypes, voice pitch is a matter of genetic hormone levels. While candidates can present evidence of their political experience to reassure voters of their competence, regardless of the effectiveness of this strategy, they cannot change their voices without being inauthentic. As voters, our reliance on irrelevant factors, such as voice pitch, to determine electability highlights how its discrimination in part constitutes its perniciousness. Pitch, along with the biased characteristics of likeability, authenticity, rationality, and competence, construct the concept of electability that leaves female candidates behind.

Incumbency, the state of holding the indicated position, is the final factor of electability. Despite evidence that the determinants of electability are biased, Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton claim that "winning elections has nothing to do with the sex of the candidate and everything to

do with incumbency. The reason people may think that women are less likely to win is that most incumbents are men, and incumbents enjoy a huge advantage over challengers and open seat candidates.”⁷¹ Additionally, they blame the paucity of women in positions of political power on a lack of female candidates, explaining that the “percentage of women holding office at each level is strikingly similar to the percentage of women candidates who have sought each public office.”⁷² They back up their claims with the results of a study that compared the success rates of 61,603 candidates for state legislature, the House, the Senate, and governor in the 1970s to 1990s. Isolating the variable of incumbency, their data supports the claim that women are as successful as men in the elections they studied. When women run, they win.

However, this does not apply to the presidential election. As argued in the previous section, the stock character of the president is not influenced by the changing narrative structure of a senator, member of the House, or a governor. The office of president is the single most powerful position in U.S. Government and, as a result, maintains a stricter narrative. Incumbency is still important in the presidential election. The Democratic nominee will automatically be at a disadvantage to the incumbent Trump. Once considered ‘unelectable,’ Trump has become electable by virtue of being elected in 2016. It is worth noting that incumbency itself is rooted in history and narrative, in the same way that ‘electability’ is. The incumbent President has always been male, and this truth disables us from isolating the power of incumbency from analyses of presidential general election voting.

The Democratic primary does not have an incumbent; therefore, incumbency cannot explain the gender bias. It also did not lack female candidates. This cycle, women ran, and women did

⁷¹ Richard A. Seltzer, Jody Newman, and Melissa V. Leighton, *Sex as a Political Variable: Women as Candidates and Voters in U.S. Elections* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), 79.

⁷² Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton, *Sex as a Political Variable*, 79.

not win. The six women who announced their candidacy before the primary began have different personalities, experiences, and flaws. The two who made it relatively far were qualified and endorsed by the New York Times. One could blame their losses on factors specific to the individual, or to their competition. Yet, the pattern of gender bias in a cycle that hailed ‘electability’ as our savior from Trump is too obvious to ignore. Despite Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton’s claim, securing the *nomination* does have to do with the sex of the candidate, and that in turn impacts the general election. Arguing that gender doesn’t impact the general election ignores the biases present in the process of selecting a nominee for the election.

IV. Is ‘Electability’ a Dogwhistle?

Jennifer Saul defines the speech act of dogwhistling as to use coded language, either covertly or overtly, intentionally or unintentionally, that is intended for a subgroup of the general audience and “concealed by an apparently straightforward message.”⁷³ In politics, dogwhistles are often employed intentionally to “send a message to one portion of the electorate that other portions might find alienating.”⁷⁴ Dogwhistling can reach a group of potential voters by discreetly appealing to their beliefs, especially when these beliefs are discriminatory. A term should be called a ‘dogwhistle’ if it is standardly used to dogwhistle. The mention of ‘electability’ in discourse alludes to the biases that constitute our perception of it, and its restrictive narrative structure. Referring to a candidate as ‘electable’ almost always means that the candidate resembles the presidential stock character. As a result, ‘electability’ hurts candidates who don’t look like what we’re accustomed to.⁷⁵ Although ‘electability’ resembles a dogwhistle for these reasons, it is not one. This section will explain how dogwhistles function, and how ‘electability’ functions differently in comparison to paradigmatic examples of a dogwhistle.

Saul defines an unintentional dogwhistle as “the unwitting use of words and/or images that, used intentionally, constitute an intentional dogwhistle, where this use has the same effect as an intentional dogwhistle.”⁷⁶ As an example, she refers to the reporters and TV producers who produced and replayed an advertisement that dogwhistles about race, known as the Willie Horton advertisement. Although there is evidence that its creators, the George H.W. Bush campaign,

⁷³ Jennifer Saul, “Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language.” *New Work on Speech Acts* (Oxford, 2018), 361, 363.

⁷⁴ Saul, “Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language,” 362.

⁷⁵ Emily Cain, “The Myth of Electability: What It Really Takes for Women to Win,” *Maine Policy Review* 28, no. 2 (2019), <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1836&context=mpr>.

⁷⁶ Saul, “Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language,” 368.

intended it to be a dogwhistle, the media that aired the advertisement *unintentionally* disseminated this dogwhistle.⁷⁷ “Audiences will very often be unaware of a dogwhistle’s presence— they may, and do, repeat the dogwhistle unwittingly,” and this repetition amplifies the effect of the dogwhistle.⁷⁸ These *amplifier dogwhistles* originate with deliberate dogwhistling.

Saul argues that there are unintentional dogwhistles that are not amplifier dogwhistles, but she maintains that “somebody *did* intend the pernicious effects of these utterances, even though their utterers did not.”⁷⁹ In the case of ‘electability,’ the unintended nature of the term’s harm facilitates its dissemination in the media and in conversation, but there is no core intentional use. The word is rarely mentioned with the intention of discrediting women or people of color and getting away with it.⁸⁰ The liberal electorate’s obsession with ‘electability’ comes from a sincere, and warranted, desire to beat Trump. This tells us that ‘electability’ is not a dogwhistle. Its harm is perpetrated systematically, not by an agent, as is the case with hermeneutical injustices.

Dogwhistles degrade and taunt a subset of their audience because the narrative structure behind a dogwhistle term, phrase, or description commonly includes a stereotype of a group. “Inner city” and “welfare” are two examples of this. “Inner city” is a dogwhistle for black, relying on the myth that criminals are primarily black. The mention of “welfare” in an American political context carries with it the stereotype that black people are lazy.⁸¹ Thus, including either

⁷⁷ Saul, “Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language,” 368. To elaborate, in 1988, George H. W. Bush’s campaign against Michael Dukakis launched an advertisement criticizing the prison furlough program. The advertisement highlighted Willie Horton, a black furloughed convict, and therefore dogwhistles that black people are criminals. Saul indicates that there is “ample evidence” that the Bush campaign intentionally dogwhistled about race.

⁷⁸ Saul, “Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language,” 367.

⁷⁹ Saul, “Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language,” 378.

⁸⁰ At least, to my knowledge.

⁸¹ Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 144. Stanley characterizes the offensive meaning of dogwhistles like “welfare” as “not-at-issue content.” While at-issue content is asserted by the utterance and thus proposed as an addition to the common ground, not-at-issue content “is directly added to the common ground” and for this reason is “not negotiable, not directly challengeable, and is added to the common ground even if the at-issue proposition is rejected.” Stanley argues that not-at-issue content propagandizes words, facilitating the erosion of reasonableness in democracy.

of these words in political speech is a coded appeal to those with pre-existing racial bias, regardless of intention.

Empirical evidence connects the concept of electability to stereotypes, specifically gender roles. The social meaning of ‘electable’ denotes the presidential stock character: an older, white, and usually moderate male who comes across as likeable, authentic, rational, and competent. Yet, ‘electability’ differs from ‘welfare’ and ‘inner city’ in both the intentionality of its transmission and in social meaning. Jason Stanley proposes that the “words with the most political efficacy are presumably going to be the seemingly innocuous ones, those words that do not appear to be slurs but are associated with a social meaning that is disabling in some way.”⁸² ‘Electability’ is one of these words: politically potent but seemingly innocuous. In making this argument, Stanley refers to Sally Haslanger’s point that although ‘slut’ is a bad word due to its social meaning, the social meaning of ‘mother’ includes normative presuppositions that go largely unnoticed, as is the case with ‘electability.’⁸³ ‘Welfare’ and ‘inner city,’ although not as taboo as ‘slut,’ more closely resemble it than ‘mother.’

Dogwhistling allows the speaker to express racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive sentiments without repercussions because the offensive sentiment can be denied. A speaker accused of dogwhistling can deny it by “appealing to just the literal meaning of the term,” the meaning intended for the entire audience.⁸⁴ As a result of this plausible deniability, dogwhistles operate within the bounds of permissible discourse. They cannot be reprimanded like the use of hate speech can. ‘Electability’ operates within the bounds of permissible discourse as well. Its literal meaning and “apparently straightforward message,” the probability that a candidate will win,

⁸² Stanley, “How Propaganda Works,” 168.

⁸³ Stanley, “How Propaganda Works,” 167-8.

⁸⁴ David Beaver and Jason Stanley, *Hustle: The Politics of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming), 26.

hides its harmful perlocutionary effects. Thanks to the hidden manner in which dogwhistles derogate, attempts to explicate their offensive content backfire, especially in a political context. The person who brings up this content is frequently accused of “playing the race card” or “the gender card.” In addition, he or she has derailed the conversation. Often, those who recognize the pernicious content choose not to bring it up to avoid backlash, maintain the flow of the conversation, or both.

For example, civil rights activist Jesse Jackson pointed out the racism of the Willie Horton ad and was “vilified as ‘playing the race card;’ the suggestion of racism was said to be ludicrous by mainstream commentators.”⁸⁵ “Playing a card” is a serious concern for female presidential candidates who may try and call attention to the bias of ‘electability’ because it aligns with the perception of women running for office as inauthentic. From this perspective, women cannot be sincere in their explication of sexism; they can only be “playing” the political game. In the difficulty of, and adverse reactions to, explication, ‘electability’ resembles a dogwhistle. However, explication yields the same adverse results when it comes to presuppositions, and ‘electability’ transmits its social meaning through presupposition.⁸⁶

‘Electability’ is not only acceptable in discourse; it is the heart of the discourse surrounding the 2020 Democratic primary. Although the concept is problematic, it is also too deeply embedded in society to try and censor. Unlike “inner city,” and the Willie Horton advertisement, ‘electability’ is not a word or image that the public and the media can or will refrain from using. It is important to this election, and for elections to come. ‘Electability’ is an ordinary word, like ‘mother’ and ‘normal,’ but with disabling effects. Words have social meanings because we associate social meanings with language through narrative and experience, but not all social

⁸⁵ Saul, “Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language,” 381.

⁸⁶ This will be elaborated on in the following section.

meanings are equally disabling. Labeling words like ‘electability’ and ‘normal’ as dogwhistles would call into question almost every word. ‘Electability’ is politically powerful and seemingly innocuous, but it is not a dogwhistle.

V. The Problem and Political Power of Presupposition

The emphasis on electability in this election cycle, stemming from the fervent desire to defeat Trump in November, has resulted in the propagation of the question “Can a woman beat Trump?” However, the question of “Is America ready for a female president?” is not new. Former Minnesota Representative Michele Bachmann, who ran for the Republican nomination in 2012, declared that Americans “aren’t ready” for a female president when asked whether Clinton could win in 2016.⁸⁷ This can be attributed in part to party loyalty, or bitterness after losing the nomination two years prior to the statement, but Bachmann’s opinion on the matter is less problematic than the presence of the question itself.

Some people might claim that “Can a woman beat Trump?” is a fairer question than “Is America ready for a female president?” The argument behind this claim is that Trump’s misogynistic character would have made him a cruel opponent for a woman in the general election. However, the intensity with which Trump would bully his opponent does not speak to a woman’s likelihood of winning. A woman beating Trump requires America to be “ready” for a female president. Both questions carry the same presupposition: that women may not be electable.

Asking whether or not a woman could beat Trump, or whether or not the world is ready for a female president, is like asking what someone thinks about “the Jewish question” or “the refugee question.”⁸⁸ The existence of a “question” or issue is presupposed, and this operates as an effective weapon in political speech. Placing the controversial statement in the presupposition rather than in the primary assertion is a subtle rhetorical maneuver that operates even when the

⁸⁷ Matt Vasilogambros and National Journal, “Woman Who Ran for President Says U.S. Not Ready for Female President,” *The Atlantic*, February 20th, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/woman-who-ran-for-president-says-us-not-ready-for-female-president/437562/>.

⁸⁸ Examples discussed in Jason Stanley’s *Philosophy of Language*, Yale University, Fall 2018.

presupposition is unintentional. Presuppositions are difficult to question or block, and as a result, they enter the common ground without a fight, or even a discussion. This follows David Lewis' rule of accommodation, which states that "If at time *t* something is said that requires presupposition *P* to be acceptable and if *P* is not presupposed just before *t*, then – *ceteris paribus* and within certain limits – presupposition *P* comes into existence at *t*."⁸⁹ In this case, the presupposition that women may not be electable has entered the common ground, making people question the electability of women. Rather than challenging the legitimacy of the question itself, people are thinking about its answer, and this increases the likelihood that the answer they come up with will be "no, the world isn't ready for a female president." This pernicious effect goes unnoticed by the majority of the population, heightening its effectiveness at silently manipulating public opinion.

Betsy Fischer Martin, the executive director of American University's Women & Politics Institute, called attention to this when she stated that: "Voters have heard this messaging coming out of the media about women candidates being unelectable. That circular conversation that's going on, the more it's being talked about, the more it gets into people's conventional wisdom."⁹⁰ Her words describe how the existence of the conversation allows the question of female electability to permeate the common ground, or "conventional wisdom," of the people. The public accommodates, and this accommodation damages the perceived electability of all female candidates. They attempt to fight this damage by arguing for their own electability, but to no avail.⁹¹

⁸⁹ David Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8, no. 1 (1979): 340, www.jstor.org/stable/30227173.

⁹⁰ Ella Nilsen, "Voters Are Back To Worrying Whether a Woman Can Win," *Vox*, January 29th, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/1/29/21060286/electability-whether-a-woman-can-win-2020>.

⁹¹ Refer to p.36 to 38 for examples of this.

In Rae Langton's analysis of hate speech, she argues that "utterances of hate speech may implicitly presuppose certain facts and norms, rather than explicitly enacting them."⁹² 'Electability' is not hate speech, but it does make implicit presuppositions. It encourages listeners to "change their factual and normative beliefs by taking on board the 'common ground' (in Robert Stalnaker's phrase) or the 'conversational score' (in David Lewis's phrase) that is presupposed."⁹³ "Normative beliefs" about what a president should be are affected by the presuppositions of 'electability.' Narrative thinking "bestows legitimacy and authority upon the expected," and presupposed norms carry this legitimacy and authority with them, adding it to the common ground and conventional wisdom of the people.⁹⁴ Utterances of and references to 'electability,' including the question "Can a woman beat Trump?," presuppose that the norm of the presidential stock character will prevail.

Marina Sbisà proposes that these presuppositions are able to transmit ideological content in the form of assumptions "not necessarily conscious but liable to be brought to consciousness, about how our human world is and how it should be."⁹⁵ And presuppositions of this nature are "assumptions that ought to be shared."⁹⁶ The presuppositions of 'electability' are ideological because they reflect its narrative structure, suggesting that future leaders should resemble the leaders of the mythic past. These suggestions more easily become reality when added to the common ground as presuppositions. Questioning a woman's electability assumes that the world *should* question it, and these assumptions become shared.

⁹² Rae Langton, "Beyond Belief: Pragmatics in Hate Speech and Pornography," in *Speech and Harm: Controversies over Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 83.

⁹³ Langton, "Beyond Belief: Pragmatics in Hate Speech and Pornography," 83.

⁹⁴ Balkin, *Cultural Software*, 191.

⁹⁵ Marina Sbisà, "Ideology and the Persuasive Use of Presupposition," *Language and ideology. Selected papers from the 6th International Pragmatics Conference 1* (1999), 503.

⁹⁶ Marina Sbisà, "Ideology and the Persuasive Use of Presupposition," 502.

One method of fighting the problem of presupposition is blocking, a technique proposed to prevent the default adjustment or accommodation that allows presuppositions to permeate the common ground, and thus prevent the success of a speech act.⁹⁷ The speech act, in this context, is convincing people that women might not be electable. The main way to block a presupposition is explicitation: making the implicit presupposition explicit, or salient. The simplest way of doing this is to directly call it out by saying something like “Hey, wait a minute.” Explicitation, however, comes with risks, including becoming an *epistemic outlier*: “the odd one out, who disagrees not only with the speaker, but also with what everyone else supposedly takes for granted.”⁹⁸ Even when correct, the outlier violates norms of conversational cooperation and risks their social standing by speaking up.⁹⁹

In the context of ‘electability,’ blocking is difficult because the question does not arise primarily in conversations where explicitation is possible. It most frequently comes up as the subject of news articles on popular websites. The ubiquity of electability as a news topic disseminates its restrictive narrative structure further. “If identity is derived from narratives that position a person in certain social groups, then the identity of public figures is negotiated in public through the storylines promulgated through the media”¹⁰⁰ Articles that question the ‘electability’ of women facilitate the false assumption that women are not electable, an assumption that then informs our view of individual female candidates. The narrative of ‘electability,’ disseminated through news sources and our own perceptual biases, shapes their

⁹⁷ Rae Langton, “Blocking as Counter-Speech,” in *New Work on Speech Acts*, ed. Daniel Fogal, Daniel W. Harris, and Matt Moss (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2018), 3, doi: 10.1093/oso/9780198738831.003.0006.

⁹⁸ Langton, “Blocking as Counter-Speech,” 17.

⁹⁹ This also occurs with the explicitation of dogwhistles, as discussed in the previous section.

¹⁰⁰ Andrea Kupfer Schneider et al., “Likeability v. Competence: The Impossible Choice Faced by Female Politicians, Attenuated by Lawyers,” 379.

identity as ‘unelectable.’ The media serves as a vehicle for electability’s pernicious perlocutionary effects.

Once the presupposition that we should question female candidate’s electability is published and broadcast to the public, it can rarely be blocked. It is out there for the world to read, and a comment saying “Hey, wait a minute” in an attempt to challenge the presupposition will only be read by a minute percentage of readers, and may not be read by the writer or publisher of the article. Thus, it doesn’t block the entrance of the presupposition into the common ground.

Since blocking tends to be unsuccessful, the damage has already been done: the question of female candidates’ ‘electability’ has invaded the common ground. The only logical next step is to answer the question that has been raised with “yes.” Yes, we are ready for a female president. A woman could beat Trump, if we gave her the chance. While the conversation cannot be changed entirely, an abundance of articles espousing that a woman can, and may be the most likely to, beat Trump could influence readers to actually believe it, or at least offer a narrative other than the prominent one of “Can a woman beat trump?.” Several media outlets have followed through on this by publishing articles with titles like “Of course a woman can beat Trump.”¹⁰¹ However, the efficacy of this is difficult to measure.

Explicit endorsements of women’s electability also fail when they reinforce the patriarchal presupposition that they are meant to undermine. The most prominent exclamation of female electability is the New York Times’ January 19th endorsement of Amy Klobuchar and Elizabeth Warren for the democratic nomination. However, this endorsement failed long before Klobuchar and Warren dropped out of the primary. Polling reveals that Warren and Klobuchar “saw no

¹⁰¹ Philip Bump, “Of Course a Woman Can Beat Trump,” *The Washington Post*, January 14th, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/01/14/course-woman-can-beat-trump/>.

significant increases in support following their joint endorsement.”¹⁰² The Times, which has endorsed one candidate for president since 1860, broke tradition by choosing two this year, and the two chosen were the two female candidates left in the race. This act makes the pernicious pragmatic presupposition that voters should support any woman. Presuppositions of this manner are made by the speaker (or, in this case, media source), rather than by a sentence or question.

Klobuchar and Warren are ideologically very distant, so the perlocutionary effect of endorsing both candidates is to suggest that a female candidate’s views don’t matter. The Times justifies the choice to endorse two ideologically-opposed candidates by arguing that the Democratic Party has two distinct visions for the future: one “radical” and one “realist.” Klobuchar is the realist choice, while Warren is the radical choice. As the endorsement itself states, “the democratic primary contest is often portrayed as a tussle between the moderates and the progressives.”¹⁰³ Yet, the editorial board has always decided between the moderate and progressive candidates and endorsed one candidate. This year, however, the tussle between moderate and progressive has been rephrased as a tussle between “radical and realist” plans of action, even though “progressive and moderate” rings eerily similar to “radical and realist”. By changing the lexicon, the Times asserts that this election is unique. Although the uniqueness of this election due to Trump is undeniable, the Times has used it to give itself permission to break from the tradition of endorsing one candidate.

In the sarcastic words of Kate Manne, “bucking the trend of backing no specific woman, the NYT goes out on a limb and backs any old specific woman. An historic day in the long fight

¹⁰² Eli Yokley, “For the New York Times, a Democratic Primary Endorsement with Little Impact,” Morning Consult, January 28th, 2020, <https://morningconsult.com/2020/01/28/for-the-new-york-times-a-democratic-primary-endorsement-with-little-impact/>.

¹⁰³ The Editorial Board, “Amy Klobuchar and Elizabeth Warren Are Democrats’ Top Choices for President,” New York Times, January 19th, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/01/19/opinion/amy-klobuchar-elizabeth-warren-nytimes-endorsement.html>.

against sexism.”¹⁰⁴ Manne’s words express the problematic presupposition of the Times’ endorsement. By endorsing not one woman, but two ideologically-opposed woman, the Times presupposes that choosing between the radical and realist futures they proposed does not matter and, therefore, the views of women do not matter. The endorsement suggests that voters should support Klobuchar or Warren *because* they are women. This is the opposite of rejecting women as candidates because they are women, but it is equally pernicious.

In an election that is free of gender bias, the views, positions, and qualifications of the candidate would be front and center. The Times’ decision to endorse two candidates, and its explanation of this decision, distracts from the qualifications of Klobuchar and Warren. Although it is possible that the Times’ Editorial Board genuinely believes Klobuchar and Warren are the best candidates, it is also possible that their choice was an act of performative feminism, a strategic decision meant to avoid the backlash they would have faced for not endorsing a woman or person of color from the most diverse group of presidential candidates of all time. Regardless of intention, the endorsement sends a message that one woman is not enough. The Times has perpetuated the sexist idea that women are less than man.

Readers look to the New York Times endorsement for a well-researched, arguably unbiased choice to inform their own personal choice. The Times Editorial Board had the “privilege” to spend “more than a dozen hours talking to candidates...yet that exercise is impossible for most Americans.”¹⁰⁵ If the Times cannot make a decision with this privilege, how can any individual American be expected to? The institution and information source from which voters expect a clear recommendation, the New York Times, is effectively silent, allowing the presupposition to

¹⁰⁴ Kate Manne (@kate_manne), “Bucking the trend of backing no specific woman, the NYT goes out on a limb and backs any old specific woman. An historic day in the long fight against sexism.” Twitter post, January 19th, 2020, twitter.com/kate_manne/status/121911876424376832.

¹⁰⁵ The Editorial Board, “Amy Klobuchar and Elizabeth Warren Are Democrats' Top Choices for President.”

speak louder than the actual words of the endorsement. ‘Electability’ is the silent endorsement of candidates like Biden, rather than Klobuchar or Warren, and it inserts this recommendation into the common ground. Although the Times’ article’s status as an endorsement should implicitly proclaim the ‘electability’ of Warren and Klobuchar, it has the opposite effect. Now that they have withdrawn from the race, the endorsement serves as a sad reminder that they were not thought of as electable enough to secure the nomination.

The presupposition of the New York Times endorsement and of the question “Can a woman beat Trump?” make it difficult for female candidates to succeed. As Maggie Astor at the New York Times put it, “the continual debate over whether any given woman is electable places the burden on that woman to convince voters of what research has already shown. This is a burden men running for office don’t have.”¹⁰⁶ As Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton’s research showed, women win in the House and Senate when the factor of incumbency is removed. As for the presidency, an Ipsos survey revealed that 74% of Democrats and Independents are comfortable with a female president, but only 33% think that their neighbors are.¹⁰⁷ This data, however, is not enough to block the electability debate. By having to not only address their electability, but fight for it, female candidates are put at an immediate disadvantage. Male candidates, especially straight, moderate, Caucasian ones, are assumed to be electable, and can better spend their campaign time and resources on more substantive issues.

¹⁰⁶ Astor, “The Word Female Presidential Candidates Have Been Hearing Over and Over.”

¹⁰⁷ Jackson and Chen, “Nominating Woman or Minority Come Second to Nominating Candidate Who Can Beat Trump.”

VI. Who's 'electable'? A Look at the 2020 Primary Candidates

The goal of a nomination campaign has always been to make the candidate seem like the most electable candidate of their party because candidates run with the goal of winning. *Viability* has everything to do with the perception of electability, or the chance of winning the general election. No one wants to nominate a candidate with minimal chance of winning. Opinions about electability are also influenced by perceptions of viability, determined by early caucus and polling results. This is logical, as the only “direct evidence of a candidate’s ability to wage an effective general election campaign is his or her ability to wage an effective pre-nomination campaign.”¹⁰⁸ Yet, it is also circular. An effective pre-nomination campaign is one that convinces the electorate of a candidate’s ‘electability,’ and this is easier for some than others.

While viability and electability have always been important elements for voters to consider, the significance of “electability” has reached new heights this election cycle in the race to defeat Trump. Every candidate for the 2020 Democratic nomination knows it and is attempting to use it strategically to help his or her campaign. Together, the candidates and the media elevate electability’s importance. Each candidate believes, and has to convince American Democrats and Independents, that he or she can defeat Donald Trump. However, this strategy is more of an uphill battle for some than others.

The ‘electability’ debate is not a burden that male candidates have to shoulder, but it still works to their advantage. Their ‘electability’ is obvious because they fit into the narrative. Joe Biden is an ideal example of this. As a white male and former Vice President, Biden checks all the boxes of electability’s narrative structure. He fits the physical characteristics, and his

¹⁰⁸ Alan I. Abramowitz, “Viability, Electability, and Candidate Choice in a Presidential Primary Election: A Test of Competing Models,” *The Journal of Politics* 51, no. 4 (November 1989): 977-992, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2131544>.

competence is proven by his experience, which is recent and conspicuous enough that voters remember it. Ideologically, he is a moderate rather than far left democrat. Biden's electability "constitutes the sole argument for his candidacy" according to one opinion piece.¹⁰⁹ A July 2019 poll affirmed his electability, concluding that voters of all ages deemed him the best bet against Trump.¹¹⁰ Beto O'Rourke's endorsement of Biden declared: "I'm voting for Joe Biden because he can defeat Donald Trump."¹¹¹ Despite poor early polling that threatened to harm his perception as viable, he persisted. After Super Tuesday, he emerged as a front-runner. Biden is confident in his own electability and has been since before Super Tuesday. In late February, Biden was asked if Democrats can beat President Donald Trump in November if he is not the nominee. Biden responded that he "think[s] it diminishes our prospect."¹¹²

Analyzing the 'electability' of the other popular candidates allows us to understand how Biden has all but secured the nomination, fulfilling the prophecy of electability's narrative. Bernie Sanders, Biden's only remaining opponent until the suspension of Sanders' campaign on April 8th, looks a lot like him. Sanders strays from the presidential stock character in that he is Jewish; every past president has been Christian. Sanders is also not a moderate, so he lacks the ideological component of 'electability.' Although there are no incumbents in the 2020 primary, Sanders has been called the "incumbent" for a progressive lane to the nomination after his strong

¹⁰⁹ Alex Pareene, "Democrats Have Created an 'Electability' Monster," *The New Republic*, May 1st, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/153723/democrats-created-electability-monster>

¹¹⁰ Mary Snow, "'HARRIS GETS BIG DEBATE BOUNCE WHILE BIDEN SINKS QUINNIPIAC UNIVERSITY NATIONAL POLL FINDS; DESPITE DROP, BIDEN STILL SEEN AS BEST BET AGAINST TRUMP,'" *Quinnipiac University Poll*, July 2nd, 2019, https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us07022019_umfj23.pdf/

¹¹¹ Eleanor Dearman, "Texas Election 2020: Beto O' Rourke Says He'll Vote For Joe Biden," *USAToday*, March 2nd, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/03/02/election-beto-orourke-joe-biden-president-super-tuesday/4936137002/>.

¹¹² Rob Way, "Biden: 'I Think It Diminishes Our Prospect' of Beating Trump if He's Not the Nominee," *Life 5 News*, February 21st, 2020, <https://www.live5news.com/2020/02/21/biden-i-think-it-diminishes-our-prospect-beating-trump-if-hes-not-nominee/>.

finish behind Hillary in the 2016 primary.¹¹³ In the wake of her loss, his supporters “advanced a Bernie-would-have-won argument,” asserting that where Hillary had failed, Bernie would have succeeded and could do so in 2020.¹¹⁴ He has positioned himself as more than just a candidate; he is the leader of a movement, or “political revolution” as he would call it.¹¹⁵ Sanders is known by both those who support him and those who don’t. For voters who believe that we need a revolution to beat Trump, Sanders is a great choice. For others, his radical views make him ‘unelectable’ against Trump, especially in comparison to the moderate Biden.

Regardless of voters’ stances, polling data testing Democratic candidates against Trump has indicated that Sanders is better poised to beat Trump than Biden.¹¹⁶ Sanders capitalized on this by posting the polls’ results on his social media accounts. Throughout his campaign, Sanders has highlighted his ability to energize voters, particularly young voters, with his promise of economic reform, and that this unique ability is what America needs to defeat Trump. In his appearance on *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon after Biden became the front-runner, Sanders acquiesced Biden’s electability but continued to argue that he “has the stronger campaign” to defeat Trump.¹¹⁷

Although he is more progressive than moderate, Sanders fared better than other moderate candidates, such as Pete Buttigieg. As a Harvard Graduate, Rhodes scholar, and Navy veteran,

¹¹³ Charlotte Alter, “Ending Her Campaign, Warren Says She’ll Take a ‘Deep Breath,’” *Time*, March 5th, 2020, <https://time.com/5797297/elizabeth-warren-drops-out-endorsement/>.

¹¹⁴ Eric Lach, “Bernie Sanders’s Electability Argument Falls Apart in Michigan,” *The New Yorker*, March 10th, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/current/bernie-sanderss-electability-argument-falls-apart-in-michigan>.

¹¹⁵ Ed Kilgore, “Welcome to the Electability Primary,” *Intelligencer*, December 22nd, 2019, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/12/welcome-to-the-electability-primary.html>

¹¹⁶ Steve Phillips, “Bernie Sanders Can Beat Trump. Here’s the Math,” *The New York Times*, February 28th, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/28/opinion/bernie-sanders-polls.html>.

¹¹⁷ Schwartz, Ian, “Bernie Sanders: ‘I Think Biden Can Beat Trump, But I Have the Stronger Campaign To Do That,’” *RealClearPolitics*, March 12th, 2020, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2020/03/12/bernie_sanders_i_think_biden_can_beat_trump_but_were_the_stronger_campaign_to_do_that.html

Buttigieg comes across as smart, rational, and brave: a recipe for competence. His policy positions are moderate. He fits the narrative structure of electability in that he is a moderate white male, straying from the presidential archetype only in his sexuality. As the first openly gay U.S. presidential candidate, Buttigieg was met with criticism from liberals who thought he wasn't "gay enough," but also with pride. Just as female candidates have to answer the problematic "is America ready for a female president?," Buttigieg's candidacy was met with the question: "is America ready for a gay president?"¹¹⁸ Despite his stellar resumé and fitting appearance, he never polled well enough to become a frontrunner. With his primary political experience being his position as the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Buttigieg lacked the experience and name recognition of establishment politicians such as Biden, Sanders, and even Bloomberg, in addition to being almost 40 years their junior.

To signal his own electability, Buttigieg released a campaign advertisement proclaiming that he has won more of the 206 counties that Trump flipped from blue to red in 2016 than any of the other Democratic candidates. The video ends with the words "Pete Buttigieg is the candidate to defeat Trump" and the tagline "this is how we win."¹¹⁹ It was posted to Instagram hours before he withdrew from the race. This brings to light how powerful the strict narrative structure of 'electability' is, despite a candidate's attempts to fight against it. While this paper focuses on the gender bias of electability's determinants, it's clear that the bias of the electability narrative is greater than gender.

¹¹⁸ Jeremy W. Peters, "There Won't Be a Gay President in 2021. So What Does Buttigieg's Campaign Tell us?," *The New York Times*, March 7th, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/us/politics/pete-buttigieg-gay-president.html>.

¹¹⁹ Pete Buttigieg (@pete.buttigieg), "This is how we win," Instagram photo, March 1st, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9Mxm0NH6R/>.

The only male candidate to make it to Super Tuesday besides Biden and Sanders is Michael R. Bloomberg, whose late entrance into the primary was facilitated by hundreds of millions in advertisement spending. By self-funding his campaign, Bloomberg influenced the public with TV advertising without having to spend time fundraising like other candidates. Bloomberg's wealth was the dominant argument for his electability, overshadowing his background as New York City mayor for an unprecedented three terms. In a February debate, he asserted that "I'm a philanthropist who didn't inherit his money but made his money, and I'm spending that money to get rid of Donald Trump, the worst president we have ever had."¹²⁰ With this statement, Bloomberg contrasts the source of his money with Trump's, and claims that money will help us "get rid of" Trump. Some voters agree, believing his billions are exactly what it takes to go up against Trump: "it's going to take a rich guy to beat Trump."¹²¹ In a field that at its peak included twenty-nine candidates, many have had to drop out due to insufficient funding to continue campaigning. A woman quoted in the Washington Post saying "I loved [Sen. Kamala D. Harris], but look at her: Out. I loved [Sen.] Cory Booker, but look at him: Out. No money," highlights the importance of money to electability.¹²² This contributes to the narrative that defeating Trump requires someone 'electable:' similar in appearance and wealth but different in terms of experience, temperament, and ideology.

A Bloomberg campaign memo distributed in February, when Bernie Sanders appeared to be the frontrunner, reads "if Biden, Buttigieg, and Klobuchar remain in the race despite having no path to appreciably collecting delegates on Super Tuesday (and beyond), they will propel

¹²⁰ Philip Rucker, "It's Going to Take a Rich Guy to Beat Trump': Why Some Democrats Back Bloomberg," *The Washington Post*, February 21, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/its-going-to-take-a-rich-guy-to-beat-trump-why-some-democrats-back-bloomberg/2020/02/20/f365f186-5353-11ea-9e47-59804be1dcfb_story.html

¹²¹ Rucker, "It's Going to Take a Rich Guy to Beat Trump': Why Some Democrats Back Bloomberg."

¹²² Rucker, "It's Going to Take a Rich Guy to Beat Trump': Why Some Democrats Back Bloomberg."

Sanders to a seemingly insurmountable delegate lead by siphoning votes away from MRB [Michael R. Bloomberg].”¹²³ Bloomberg’s suggestion that the other moderate candidates step aside in order for him to become the nominee not only underestimated Biden’s potential but made the incorrect assumption that the votes were Bloomberg’s to be “siphoned away.” Bloomberg was correct in that a lack of unity in the Democratic party is an issue, but he was not the candidate that voters united behind. Klobuchar and Buttigieg both dropped out right before Super Tuesday and immediately endorsed Biden. After only winning the territory of American Samoa on Super Tuesday while Biden won ten states, Bloomberg dropped out of the presidential race. He endorsed Biden as well. These endorsements, along with others, enhanced Biden’s ‘electability’ argument by displaying former opponents who acquiesced that Biden was more ‘electable’ than them.

Bloomberg’s initial confidence in his own electability was justified because he fit the narrative structure. If Biden had not filled the archetypal role of moderate, straight, white male in the 2020 primary field, it’s plausible that Bloomberg could have become the nominee. When Bloomberg withdrew and endorsed Biden, he expressed that he “entered the race for president to defeat Donald Trump” and he is “leaving the race for the same reason.”¹²⁴ His commitment to defeating Trump was a case for his own ‘electability’ and then became a case for Biden’s. In comparison to Bloomberg and Biden, the female candidates have to work harder to convince the electorate of their electability.

¹²³ Gabriel Debenedetti, “How Beating Up Bloomberg Has Reinvigorated the Democratic Field,” *Intelligencer*, February 22, 2020, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/02/beating-up-bloomberg-has-reinvigorated-the-democratic-field.html>.

¹²⁴ Mark Niquette, “Michael Bloomberg Ends Presidential Bid, Endorses Joe Biden,” *Bloomberg*, March 4th, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-04/bloomberg-suspends-presidential-race-after-super-tuesday-losses>.

The candidate field of the primary initially included six women: Tulsi Gabbard, Kirsten Gillibrand, Kamala Harris, Amy Klobuchar, Elizabeth Warren, and Marianne Williamson. By March, there were only two viable female candidates: Klobuchar and Warren. Knowing that the narrative of electability does not work in their favor, Klobuchar and Warren adapted their strategies to emphasize their electability. Warren has even done so in a way that supports not just herself, but Klobuchar as well. During the January debate in Des Moines, Warren stated that: “Look at the men on this stage: Collectively, they have lost 10 elections. The only people on this stage who have won every single election that they’ve been in are the women, Amy and me.”¹²⁵ This assertion did not mention the type of elections that have been won and lost, but it did not need to. It serves its purpose by painting the female candidates as winners: they have won in the past and can win this time too. By momentarily rewriting the narrative with the male candidates as “losers,” Warren attempted to use the biased concept of electability to her favor, stressing her own electability. In addition, Warren’s commitment to taking pictures with her supporters after campaign events, now known as “selfie lines,” emblematic of her dedication to appearing likeable, which in turn is meant to increase her perceived electability.

Warren’s supporters echoed her strategy. A late February Twitter campaign consisted of people posting “#PresidentWarren is electable.” This attempt to change the narrative structure of electability is denoted by the language of prematurely titling her President Warren and directly using the term “electable” rather than saying “#PresidentWarren can beat Trump.” Another social media campaign declared that “she’s electable if you vote for her,” adding an expletive to fight against the narrative structure that electability influences voters to vote for who’s “electable,” rather than who they want.

¹²⁵ Astor, “The Word Female Presidential Candidates Have Been Hearing Over and Over.”

Ultimately, Warren and her supporters' efforts to convince the public of her electability were in vain. After a dismal performance on Super Tuesday, including losing her home state of Massachusetts, Warren withdrew from the race on March 5th. During the press conference in which she announced her decision, Warren implicitly denounced 'electability.' When she no longer needed to position herself as 'electable,' Warren begged listeners to "cast a vote from [their] heart," rather than a vote for who they think could win against Trump.¹²⁶ Perhaps this is what we should all be doing instead of bowing at the altar of 'electability.' Warren shaped her campaign around convincing voters of her electability, most voters' top priority, and still could not win. However, rejecting 'electability' is easier said than done for voters unwilling to risk losing to Trump and incapable of separating 'electability' from the incalculable odds of winning.

Echoing Warren's January statement that she and Amy Klobuchar are the only candidates who have won every single election they've been in, Klobuchar captioned a February 23rd campaign Instagram "I am here to serve Donald Trump notice: I have won every race, every place, every time. And I can win big in November."¹²⁷ At debates and rallies, she reiterated this sentiment. She argued for her competence by stating that she has passed over 100 bills, and she argued for her likeability by saying she "has the heart to be President."¹²⁸ Her words speak to the determinants of electability, as well as electability itself.

Turning away from Klobuchar's own 'electability' strategy to how the media portrayed her, journalist Matthew Yglesias makes the case for Klobuchar in a Vox article entitled "Amy

¹²⁶ "Warren: Cast a vote with your heart," *Politico*, March 4th, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/video/2020/03/04/warren-cast-a-vote-with-your-heart-069780>

¹²⁷ Amy Klobuchar (@amyklobuchar), "I am here to serve Donald Trump notice: I have won every race, every place, every time. And I can win big in November," Instagram photo, February 23rd, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B87U0z9Hfx4/>

¹²⁸ Amy Klobuchar (@amyklobuchar), "I've won every race with a fired-up Democratic base, Independents, and moderate Republicans every single time," Twitter post, February 19th, 2020, <https://twitter.com/amyklobuchar/status/1230346647067971591>.

Klobuchar is the thinking moderate Democrat’s electability candidate.” His case hinges on the concept of electability. Klobuchar’s ‘electability,’ he argues, comes from her typicality: “She’s the typical age for a presidential aspirant, has the typical qualifications, and has somewhat banal Democratic Party policy views.”¹²⁹ What Klobuchar refers to as “pragmatic progressivism” is a moderate position that stands in opposition to Warren and Sanders, who are more liberal.¹³⁰ Her “banal,” moderate Democratic policy views make her more electable than Warren according to pundits’ preferences for moderates when measuring electability. While she may not stand out, she seems to be ‘electable’ on paper besides the fact that she is a woman. Klobuchar’s typicality is the source of her electability, but it isn’t enough to make her ‘electable.’ So what’s the problem?

Klobuchar lacks the name recognition of well-established politicians like Biden, Sanders, and Warren. More importantly, however, Klobuchar has been painted as unlikeable: she treats her campaign staffers poorly, so how can we trust her with America? A story of her eating a salad with her comb and then asking a staff member to clean it, and rumors of her anger have appeared in articles with inflammatory, clickbait titles like “You do know Amy Klobuchar is an abusive boss, right?” and “Terrified Aides Say Amy Klobuchar is just like Trump.”¹³¹ These articles disseminate a narrative of unlikability that contradicts with Klobuchar’s message of having the “heart” to be president, and is detrimental to her candidacy, especially as a woman.

As discussed previously, likeability is particularly important for female candidates. Articles disparaging Klobuchar’s personality are more politically damaging than ones decrying her policy

¹²⁹ Matthew Yglesias, “Amy Klobuchar is the Thinking Moderate Democrat’s Electability Candidate,” *Vox*, February 12th, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/2/11/21133949/amy-klobuchar-new-hampshire-electable>

¹³⁰ Kilgore, “Welcome to the Electability Primary.”

¹³¹ Emma Roller, “You Do Know Amy Klobuchar is an Abusive Boss, Right?,” *In These Times*, February 14th, 2020, <https://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/22312/amy-klobuchar-workers-abusive-boss-senate>, and Tina Nguyen “Terrified Aides Say Senator Klobuchar is Just Like Trump,” *Vanity Fair*, February 8th, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/02/senator-klobuchar-temper-rumors>

because people care more about a female candidate's likeability. Likeability is congruent with stereotypical female gender roles; anger is not. The articles reveal moral outrage against Klobuchar for failing to ascribe to the prescriptive role of women. If roles were reversed and a male candidate was treating his staff poorly, the news would either never see the front page or be instinctively ignored, a result of the credibility surplus granted to men in contrast with the deficit experienced by women. The most salient example of this is the election of Trump after his "grab 'em by the pussy" comment went viral. As for the front runners of the 2020 primary, the Washington Examiner reported in July 2019 that Joe Biden berates his staff, and Bernie Sanders' former colleagues have described him as "rude, short-tempered, and, occasionally, downright hostile."¹³² Yet, these stories never gained traction in the news cycle and damaged the candidacies of their subjects in the way allegations against Klobuchar did.

The failure of Klobuchar, Warren, and others can be blamed on their individual flaws, but the common thread underlying each of their losses is a lack of 'electability.' Every candidate during this primary, including those not mentioned, declared that they were the candidate who could, and would, beat Trump to convince voters of their 'electability.' However, this tactic only worked for candidates who fit the stock character of a president. Those who do not were still perceived as 'unelectable.' Even when used with the intention of rewriting the narrative of 'electability' and superseding its biases, 'electability' still recalls the presidential stock character, which is partially why this strategic use fails. Biden's success in this year's primary is a

¹³² Joseph Simonson, "Biden Aide: 'Everyone who has worked for him has been screamed at,'" *The Washington Examiner*, July 1st, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/biden-aide-everyone-who-has-worked-for-him-has-been-screamed-at>; Paul Heintz, "Anger Management: Sanders fights for Employees, Except His Own," *Seven Days Vermont*, August 26th, 2015, <https://www.sevendaysvt.com/vermont/anger-management-sanders-fights-for-employees-except-his-own/Content?oid=2834657>.

reflection of the persistent strength of the presidential stock character and the 'electability' narrative.

VII. The Hermeneutical Illusion

As a ubiquitous tool of understanding, narrative can be a source of powerful ideological effects.¹³³ By connecting the narrative structure of electability to Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice, we can understand how the pernicious ideological effects of 'electability' not only engender testimonial injustice but also constitute a hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial and hermeneutical injustice are similar in that they both concern exclusion from the pooling of knowledge. In testimonial injustice, this exclusion is owed to "identity prejudice on the part of the hearer," whereas in hermeneutical injustice, the exclusion is owed to "structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource."¹³⁴ Put simply, in a hermeneutical injustice, credibility is no longer the site of the epistemic wrongdoing. In the case of 'electability,' female candidates are subject to testimonial injustice as a result of credibility deficits that represent them as less competent and less trustworthy. As a hermeneutical injustice, the site of the wrongdoing shifts to collective social knowledge, affecting both candidates and the electorate. The narrative structure of 'electability' and the perceptual biases of its determinants damage people in their capacity as knowers.

The wrong of a hermeneutical injustice lies in an asymmetrical cognitive disadvantage, arising from the "social and practical context in which the collective hermeneutical impoverishment impinges."¹³⁵ We do not lack a concept for electability; however, our possession of the concept still enables an asymmetrical cognitive disadvantage resulting from hermeneutical impoverishment. Hermeneutical impoverishment refers to a gap in our "shared tools for social interpretation."¹³⁶ Since the injustice of 'electability' does not stem from a hermeneutical gap as

¹³³ Balkin, *Cultural Software*, 188.

¹³⁴ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 162.

¹³⁵ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 161.

¹³⁶ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 6.

outlined in Fricker's framework, I will refer to the concept of electability as a *hermeneutical illusion*. The hermeneutical illusion operates differently from the hermeneutical gap in that it harms the subjects, presidential candidates, as well as those who are not the direct subject of the injustice: the electorate. It tricks voters into not giving female candidates the serious consideration they are owed, and it convinces us that a politician's run cannot change the social narrative.

Identity power enacts *hermeneutical marginalization* because "there are prejudicial stereotypes in the social atmosphere that represent [a person] as unsuitable [for the job], and which negatively influence the judgements of employers."¹³⁷ In the case of electability, the job is the presidency and voters across America are the "employers." Being "suitable for the job" is being 'electable.' These "prejudicial stereotypes" reside in electability's narrative structure and the gender biases of its determinants. When women run for president, they are prejudicially excluded from being perceived as suitable for the job. This exclusion disables women from achieving full hermeneutical participation. Fricker clarifies that this can work "purely structurally" and does not need to be attributed to an agent.¹³⁸ While the popularity of the term in speeches and in the media has worsened its effect, the illusion of electability cannot be blamed on any individual or institution. It's systematic.

To offer an example of hermeneutical injustice in addition to the sexual harassment one, Fricker refers to Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*, in which the hermeneutical impoverishment of the 1950s "burden[s] his sexual experience with layers of falsifying meaning."¹³⁹ The young Edmund only understood homosexuality as a sickness and a sin.

¹³⁷ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 154.

¹³⁸ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 154.

¹³⁹ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 163.

“Homosexual” meant *something* to him, but the meaning was distorted. This conceptualization rendered Edmund incapable of accepting himself; its authoritative construction constituted his social being as an adolescent. He feared the label of “homosexual” and thus his own identity. This exemplifies the power of collective understandings to construct people and experiences. The harm of the hermeneutical injustice in this example was both Edmund “being unfairly disadvantaged by [the] collective hermeneutical lacuna” of the concept of homosexuality, and how this concept unjustly constructed Edmund’s selfhood.

The meaning of ‘electability’ is also distorted; its narrative structure resembles the authoritative construction of “homosexual.” Although the danger of “electability” is more subtle and less ill-intentioned than that of “homosexual” in the 1950s, the possession of the concept unfairly disadvantages candidates and voters by being a collective understanding, or illusion, that distorts reality. The presence and strength of this narrative structure make it so that those who use, read, and hear the word have a significant area of their social experience obscured from understanding. Candidates who shape their campaigns around convincing the public of their electability despite not fitting into its narrative structure are deceived into thinking that their campaigns can rewrite the narrative structure of electability. If these candidates ran their campaigns differently, they would still be subject to the pernicious effects of electability. However, the nature and purpose of campaigning is to convince the electorate that the candidate can win. Women in politics are excluded from full hermeneutical participation because they are deemed unsuitable for politics’, and America’s, highest office. Journalists and news outlets that publish articles about electability widen its influence and thus its harm. Lastly, the general public, who listens to candidates and reads the news, is prevented from understanding the harm of engaging with and buying into the notion of electability. Although we would presume that

female voters would be more inclined to prefer a female presidential candidate, they are just as susceptible to the illusion of ‘electability.’¹⁴⁰ We are all misled by the illusion that the candidate who will win the general election must be the one who fits the narrative structure of electability. That is only so because we make it so by believing this. The injustice is both harmful and also wrongful, as Fricker dictates it should be. The injustice of “electability” is both of these because it discriminates, harming female, non-white, and non-straight candidates’ chances of winning. Rather than impeding the construction of selfhood, the hermeneutical injustice of electability impedes political progress and the preservation of our democracy.

Fricker’s framework for hermeneutical injustice, and my argument for wrongful discrimination against female candidates, based on the results of psychological studies, rely on the background condition of hermeneutical marginalization. Fricker argues that “women’s powerlessness meant that their social position was one of unequal hermeneutical participation, and something like this sort of inequality provides the background condition for hermeneutical injustice.”¹⁴¹ At the time of second wave feminism, this was the background condition for the hermeneutical injustice of sexual harassment mentioned in the introduction to this paper. While women are more powerful now than they were in the late 20th century, their unequal hermeneutical participation remains the background condition for the 2020 Democratic primary. The origin of women’s epistemic exclusion lies in historical patterns of the marginalization of women that can be traced back much earlier than the 20th century.

¹⁴⁰ Jackson and Chen, “Nominating Woman or Minority Come Second to Nominating Candidate Who Can Beat Trump.” The percentage of female respondents who reported prioritizing a female candidate is only 5% more than the percentage of male respondents. Both men and women prioritize electing a candidate they think can beat Trump, an ‘electable’ candidate, above electing a woman. Although this study did not test beliefs on whether a woman could beat Trump, the prioritization is clear.

¹⁴¹ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 152.

While hermeneutical marginalization can explain the exclusion of female candidates, the voting-eligible population of the United States cannot all be hermeneutically marginalized under Fricker's conception of the term, or there would be no contrast in hermeneutical participation between a marginalized group and a dominant group. However, I claim that they are all affected by the hermeneutical illusion of 'electability,' albeit to a lesser degree than the candidates themselves. In the case of a hermeneutical illusion, the background condition is altered to allow for this. Hermeneutical marginalization, at its core, is about powerlessness. And voters are powerless to the narrative.

Kristie Dotson cautions against Fricker's reliance on the background condition of hermeneutical marginalization. For Dotson, this condition, and Fricker's closed conceptual structure, "forecloses the possibility of alternative forms of epistemic injustice" and underestimates the pervasive nature of these injustices.¹⁴² She defines *epistemic oppression* broadly as "epistemic exclusions afforded positions and communities that produce deficiencies in social knowledge."¹⁴³ Deficiencies in social knowledge are generated by the value we place on 'electability.' The illusion of 'electability' impairs the ability of voting-eligible citizens to participate in our democracy. This exclusion means 'electability' universally damages not only "individual knowers, but also the state of social knowledge" in the political sphere.¹⁴⁴ Voters do not experience the hermeneutical marginalization that candidates do, but they do experience epistemic oppression as a result of the hermeneutical illusion.

As a form of government that Abraham Lincoln declared to be of the people, by the people, and for the people, "democracy requires that the policies that apply to everyone must be the

¹⁴² Kristie Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale on Limiting Epistemic Oppression," *Frontiers* 33, no. 1 (2012): 25, doi: 10.5250/fronjwomestud.33.1.0024.

¹⁴³ Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale on Limiting Epistemic Oppression," 24.

¹⁴⁴ Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale on Limiting Epistemic Oppression," 24.

result of fair deliberation and equal participation.”¹⁴⁵ The election of a president, who makes decisions on behalf of all American people, applies to everyone. Yet, ‘electability’ damages both fair deliberation and equal participation. The injury of participation is both literal, in that electability may turn voters away from the polls altogether, and epistemic, in that it compels voters to not give the same serious consideration to female candidates as they do to their male counterparts.¹⁴⁶ There is no opportunity for fair deliberation about a candidate’s odds of winning the general election when the use of ‘electability’ in discourse ostracizes candidates outside the term’s narrative structure and misleads voters. In this way, the danger of ‘electability’ undermines democracy.

The hermeneutical illusion of ‘electability’ reflects the biases of the entire country, reinforcing old-fashioned gender roles and race relations. Relying on this problematic concept will result in electing the same type of person over and over again. Yet, the point of political and social movements is to change society for the better, which means changing who gets elected. ‘Electability’ damages our epistemology of the social, constituting an epistemic injustice for every voting-eligible citizen whose decision to vote, and who to vote for, will be affected by it.

¹⁴⁵ Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 91.

¹⁴⁶ The potential influence of ‘electability’ on voter turnout is discussed further in the following section.

VIII. Conclusion

In hoping to avoid the harmful effects of ‘electability,’ we can derive some relief from the age schism of its influence. Research has revealed that older voters are more likely to prioritize defeating Trump, while younger voters are more motivated by political ideology, such as support for Medicare-For-All, than any other factor.¹⁴⁷ The younger generation is less willing to compromise what they want in policy for an unverified but supposedly higher likelihood of beating Trump. In order for young voters to save us from electability’s epistemic injustice, they have to turn out at the polls in large numbers. However, low voter turnout has historically been an issue, especially for the younger generation: younger people have a lower propensity to vote than older people.¹⁴⁸

As Americans and members of a democracy, voting is one of our most important rights. The ability to decide who will be the leaders of tomorrow is in the hands of the people, which is not true in every country. Yet, only around 60% of eligible Americans cast their ballots in the 2016 and 2012 general presidential elections.¹⁴⁹ According to the Pew Research Center, turnout in the primaries is half of that or less. 2008 set a record high for primary turnout, with 30.4% of eligible citizens voting.¹⁵⁰ It is understandable that primary turnout is lower than general election turnout. The primary has more candidates, making it more time-consuming to get to know the candidates before voting for one, and is deemed less important because it is within one’s own party rather than in competition with the opposing party. Low voter turnout for both the primary and general

¹⁴⁷ Ezra Marcus, “The Democratic Party’s Generational Divide May Decide Who Wins the Primary,” *Mic*, March 4th, 2020, <https://www.mic.com/p/how-the-democratic-partys-age-schism-explains-super-tuesday-22594199>

¹⁴⁸ US Census Bureau, “Voting in America: A Look at the 2016 Presidential Election,” *United States Census Bureau*, May 10th, 2017, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting_in_america.html.

¹⁴⁹ US Census Bureau, “Voting in America: A Look at the 2016 Presidential Election.”

¹⁵⁰ Drew DeSilver, “Primary Turnout for 2016 High but Not Quite a Record,” *Pew Research Center*, June 10th, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/10/turnout-was-high-in-the-2016-primary-season-but-just-short-of-2008-record/>.

election can also be attributed to the structure of the American voting system; delegate allocation in the nomination and the electoral college in the general election make an individual vote seem insignificant. Voting access laws and the injustice of voter suppression tactics, as well as general voter apathy, are responsible as well. The low rate of primary turnout makes it even more important that people continue to vote and aren't alienated by 'electability.' The concept of electability plays a large role in voter strategy, as discussed, but it can also engender voter apathy.

While electability tells us who to vote for, it also promotes a sense of futility. This futility derives from the notion that our individual vote means nothing. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by almost three million votes but lost the presidency; it's easy to think that one vote doesn't matter. With electability, voters might think that the most 'electable' candidate will win regardless of whether or not they vote.

This line of thought would be a direct result of the epistemic injustice of 'electability,' which denies voters full hermeneutical participation, and could further decrease voter turnout. In misinforming people that the winner has already been chosen, voters are wronged in their capacity as knowers and as participants in our democracy. As with most change, reductions in voter turnout largely works at the margins. Futility may alienate voters who already have difficulty getting to the polls due to work schedules or polling locations and lines. This group disproportionately consists of people who are less well-educated and less affluent than committed voters.¹⁵¹ According to a Pew Research Center poll, relatively large numbers of young people, Hispanics, and those with less education and lower incomes are less likely to vote

¹⁵¹ "Who Votes, Who Doesn't, and Why." Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, December 31, 2019, <https://www.people-press.org/2006/10/18/who-votes-who-doesnt-and-why/>

in a primary or general election.¹⁵² ‘Electability’ will not inspire them to vote. Those who have always voted, those with privilege, will continue to do so. And they will generally vote for those who fit the narrow narrative structure of electability, cementing the past. Thus, electability constrains future political reality to past political reality.

We cannot predict with certainty who would win the November election against Trump, but we do know that most voters are looking to vote either Democrat or Republican. The polarization of our two dominant political parties limits the extent to which other factors play a role. Once the primary is over, the significance of the race, gender, or sexual orientation of the Democratic nominee will pale in comparison to their partisanship. These characteristics influence our perceptions of ‘electability,’ and thus influence the primary, but they do not bear on electability itself: the likelihood of winning the election. Taking this into consideration, the deciding factor of November’s general election is whether more Democrats or more Republicans will turn out to vote in key states. Although turnout in the general election may be influenced by which candidate becomes the nominee, most Democrats planning to vote will “vote blue no matter who” wins the primary. In the primary, when voters are “unable to rely on partisanship as a decision-making shortcut,” our reliance on ‘electability’ is much greater.¹⁵³

The question of electability presupposed that candidates who do not fit the narrow narrative structure of the term could not be elected, and it inserted this presupposition into the common ground so the general public believed this, or at least questioned it. The term itself presupposes a fixed reality and common ground within which the same type of candidate will always win. If the purpose of democratic politics is not only to represent the people, but also to promote

¹⁵² “Who Votes, Who Doesn’t, and Why.”

¹⁵³ Hayes and Lawless, *Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era*, 23.

positive change, this occurs by shifting the common ground. By preventing the common ground from shifting, ‘electability’ threatens democracy.

Many voters believe that defeating Trump is the key to protecting our democracy, but in holding this belief, they unintentionally damage democracy. The economic theory of democracy posits that “a policy is genuinely democratic if it is voted on by majority vote by fully rational agents who are wholly self-interested” and this model “presupposes that people have reliable access to their interests.”¹⁵⁴ The hermeneutical illusion of ‘electability’ blocks voters’ access to their own interests. Voters are genuinely interested in defeating Trump, but they are deceived as to how to best realize this goal.¹⁵⁵ The path to defeating Trump is written for them by the possession of the concept ‘electability,’ preventing voters from realizing their own candidate preferences. As written in *The New Republic*, “the democratic principle rests on the assumption that the votes the people cast on candidates and the proposals at hand are, in fact, votes truly for or against those candidates and proposals—that our votes are based not on what we suppose might win, but on what we believe is right.”¹⁵⁶ This assumption “has always been flawed,” but is nevertheless crucial to our democracy.¹⁵⁷ If we stagnate American political progress by voting, or choosing not to vote, based on electability, our democracy is not a democracy at all.

¹⁵⁴ Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 11.

¹⁵⁵ Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 11.

¹⁵⁶ Osita Nwaneyu, “‘Electability is a Poisonous Political Shibboleth,’” *The New Republic*, January 17th, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/156241/electability-poisonous-political-shibboleth>

¹⁵⁷ Nwaneyu, “‘Electability is a Poisonous Political Shibboleth.’”

Acknowledgments

I am incredibly grateful to Jason Stanley, my advisor, whose seminar on Language and Power with Jack Balkin inspired this thesis. This paper would not have been possible without Professor Stanley's reading recommendations, meetings both in person and over Zoom, and invaluable feedback on early drafts. Thank you to my peer reviewers Claire Hu and Ellie Garland for the detailed commentary that made this a better thesis. I am also thankful to Natalia Córdova for guiding the Cognitive Science Class of 2020 through the thesis process, and for responding to my many logistical questions. I want to thank the Yale Cognitive Science department for allowing me to construct a major based on my interests, culminating in this thesis. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for always supporting me.

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