

Where were Harris's white women voters? Swooning over Trump, it seems.

BY LAURA KIPNIS

A dark confession: I'm a feminist who was unmoved by the prospect of the first female president. It's a politician's politics I care about, not symbolics and white suits. If there was once an idea that when women attained political power they'd rule differently — more wisely, compassionately, peaceably — we've accumulated no shortage of examples to the contrary. Plenty of women in office have been as warmongering, corrupt, inept, fascistic, and eager to tread on women's rights as any standard-issue male politician.

Speaking as someone who voted for Hillary Clinton (though not in the primary) mostly because she wasn't Donald Trump, and for Kamala Harris mostly because she isn't Trump, it wasn't female solidarity that dictated my votes. I didn't expect it from other women either, even if I thought a Harris victory was still in the cards.

If we're going to be clear-headed about her loss, we need to retire the premise that misogyny explains the defeats of two obviously capable women candidates by Trump. Here's a fascinating stat: The percentage of the popular vote that Trump won against Biden, 46.9 percent, was actually slightly higher than his percentage of the vote against Clinton, 46.1 percent, in 2016. Misogyny may have provided a convenient explanation for her loss, but it underexplains it.

It underexplains things this time around too. Sure, there was endless misogynistic rhetoric aimed at Harris, but if she lost progressive and Muslim votes because of her Israel/Gaza policies or moderates because she was too closely tied to Biden, it's not because she's a woman.

Yet there's still a psychosexual dimension to electing a national leader, which is where the white female voter's relation to Trump has been a thorny thing to come to terms with.

It's distressing for some of us to admit, but there's clearly some kind of erotic allure to the man for a lot of women and to the domination fantasies embedded in GOP ideas about women's bodies generally. (Exit polls suggest that nonwhite women are far less susceptible to either.)

Look at the rapturous expressions on women's faces at Trump rallies over the years: They think Trump is hot. He's a Handsy Daddy, which they don't have to forgive or overlook — they're happy being daddy's girls because it stirs something in them.

Yes, the Republican Party's relation to women's bodies is simultaneously paternal and salacious, as we've seen nauseatingly demonstrated in its obsession with pregnancy and abortion, and as we've seen nauseatingly demonstrated in Trump's relation to his daughter Ivanka's body. Did that disqualify him with his female fan base? Nope, no more than being a multiple felon found liable for rape did. It's just Daddy being Daddy.

That particular brand of allure isn't available to women candidates, unfortunately. Harris is charismatic, attractive, and charming, but whatever kind of perverse fizz Trump exudes (apparently even in his dotage), it isn't something Harris is capable of projecting. Bill Clinton — the last Democrat to win the white female vote — knew how to work the hot daddy magic too, and even a lot of feminists were willing to forgive whatever he got up to, no matter how many accusers came forward.

My point is this: If white women continue to vote more than women in other demographics for men who insult, paw, and diminish them, are they really simply voting on behalf of their husbands' interests, as we keep being told? Because they're cowering and obedient? So



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A campaign rally in Greensboro, N.C., on Nov. 2.

the patronizing imprecations of Harris surrogates like Michelle Obama and Julia Roberts would have it. It's as if Republican women needed to be reminded by Democrats that wriggling out from under their husbands' thumbs in the secrecy of the voting booth was always an option.

When I look at GOP women, I see some pretty feisty specimens: They shoot guns (sometimes their dogs), they break every rule of conduct in the hallowed halls of Congress, fearlessly taunt their enemies, mow down Ivy League college presidents in acrimonious televised hearings, and so on.

I don't see sexualized paternalism being foisted on the female Trump electorate. I see them as willing participants making active choices. That includes voting to overturn abortion bans in the majority of red states with such measures on the ballot.

What then explains their fealty to the party that's attempted to deny them those rights at every turn? How does voting for bodily autonomy coexist with voting for a swaggering sexist like Donald Trump, who alternates between assaulting women and claiming to be protecting them? It seems inexplicable without admitting that the abusive paternalism of the GOP has some sort of deep, even libidinal appeal.

My question going into this election was whether this would be the year Trump would finally lose his libidinal grip over conservative women. I thought it was a possibility: His mojo was fading, people seemed bored, the polls kept telling us that the Dobbs Supreme Court ruling had turned everything around, even for red state women.

All apparently untrue. I don't expect that the psy-

chopolitical subtleties of these internal calculations are anything that exit polling will sufficiently explain, because people don't speak straightforwardly about such matters. They talk about anxieties like borders and crime, blithely ignoring inconvenient facts such as Trump's actual dismal track record on the same issues they claim to be voting on.

We on the other side are equally capable of ignoring inconvenient data points.

It remains an electoral problem for pro-choice progressive politics that there's a significant female demographic for whom the Handsy Daddies of the GOP inspire feelings of safety, not revulsion, even if we find it more palatable to imagine cowering GOP wives than women actively exercising preferences.

Sylvia Plath's line about every woman adoring a fascist, from her flintily titled poem "Daddy," is as overquoted as it is — apologies for dredging it up once more — because nothing more succinctly captures what remains so disturbingly, even eternally, the psychosexual case. For a visual rendition, regard all those photoshopped sexy Trump the Protector images — in superhero garb with an impressive codpiece and bulging thighs or bare-chested with 12-pack abs. Our rescuer. If the combination of immigration rhetoric and fantasy codpiece still work their magic on so many female psyches, then telling women to vote their conscience isn't exactly a strategy.

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