

BOOK REVIEW

***Walking the Gendered Tightrope: Theresa May and Nancy Pelosi as Legislative Leaders.* By Melissa Haussman and Karen M. Kedrowski. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023. 288 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN: 9780472076345; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN: 9780472056347.**

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*Walking the Gendered Tightrope* by Melissa Haussman and Karen Kedrowski offers a unique analysis of two women who served as party leaders: Theresa May from the United Kingdom and Nancy Pelosi of the United States. *Walking the Gendered Tightrope* examines the ways that May and Pelosi navigated problems not of their own making within political contexts featuring party disunity and adversarial institutions dominated by masculinist processes and values. Though the book discusses the circumstances under which both came to leadership, it also addresses the challenges they faced within their respective parties, particularly by men, once they made it to the top. Despite their political aptitude, experience, and achievements, May and Pelosi often failed to receive support or credit and were disrespected. Overall, this work highlights the complex ways that political leadership and loyalty are gendered and how this shapes women's ability to stay in power.

The book engages a wide variety of gender and politics literatures, including examinations of women coming to power during unique times such as crises and portrayals of women leaders as outsiders (Beckwith 2015). Throughout the book, Haussman and Kedrowski rely heavily on the gender and cabinet literature, specifically Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet's book *Cabinet, Ministers, & Gender* (2019) and various writings by Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, including their book *Women in Presidential Cabinets: Power Players or Abundant Tokens?* (2016). This scholarship helps inform gendered aspects of selection criteria, opportunity structures, and representational dynamics.

The introduction provides a rich historical overview of the political environments and party cleavages in the United Kingdom and the United States to contextualize the challenges that May and Pelosi encountered. Chapter 2 presents the career trajectories of May and Pelosi and their entry into leadership

posts. Pelosi was minority whip and Democratic Party leader before becoming Speaker of the House multiple times, while May held a series of ministerial posts throughout her tenure and then became Conservative Party leader and prime minister. Hausman and Kedrowski trace the factors affecting party leadership decisions over time more generally and how salient issues as well as discord and competition within the party shaped May's and Pelosi's rise. They argue that both women were essentially party workhorses but repeatedly undervalued. Cabinet selection criteria such as experience, expertise, education, and representation (Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet 2019; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2016) can help explain their ability to gain power, but these same conditions could not ensure their survival. May's rise to the prime ministership is viewed as an example of a woman coming to power under special circumstances, specifically Prime Minister David Cameron's sudden resignation following the Brexit referendum in 2016. Pelosi's path is seen in many ways as departing from tradition and as emblematic of women offering a fresh face of leadership by enhancing descriptive representation in the Democratic Party. Ultimately, neither May nor Pelosi affiliated with "the old boys club" (95), and this affected their tenure and overall treatment.

Chapter 3 follows May's tightrope walk through the Brexit Withdrawal Implementation Act negotiation. May is depicted as a loyal "organizational partisan" of the Conservative Party, but one from the more modern wing favoring rules more conducive to supporting diverse groups and women. Understandably, most of the tensions described involve the Brexit negotiation, including cleavages between soft and hard "Brexiters" and some "remainers" in the party. May was further hampered by the loss of the Conservative majority in 2017. In an unwinnable and complicated situation, May called an early election in April 2017. Some Conservative Party "remainers" formed an independent group, and she faced an onslaught of cabinet resignations. The contest also resulted in the election of more Brexiter hard-liners. Though she survived two votes of no confidence, one in December 2018 and another in January 2019 (after promising not to seek the party leadership after the next elections), May announced her impending resignation in May 2019 (she stepped down in July). Her situation grew untenable following multiple parliamentary rejections of withdrawal agreement drafts. While she negotiated most of the withdrawal with the European Union before her departure, her successor, Boris Johnson, received the credit. Passage of the withdrawal agreement was possible because of the return of the Conservative majority following early parliamentary elections that Johnson organized for December 2019. Despite various leadership deficits and missteps, Johnson did not face the hostility or level of intraparty challenges regarding the withdrawal agreement.

Chapter 4 follows Pelosi's tightrope walk and myriad intraparty challenges. The main issue analyzed is the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), known as Obamacare. However, this is only one of the many leadership challenges outlined given her long career as a leader. Throughout her tenure, Pelosi contended with ideological divisions within the Democratic Party and challenges from both moderates and progressives. Like May, Pelosi was often unrecognized for her achievements. Several examples are provided, including the aftermath of

the 2018 elections. Having delivered on promises to recruit viable candidates and provide them with substantial resources, Pelosi faced a leadership challenge as she sought another term as House Speaker (she was previously Speaker from 2007 to 2011). This was despite playing the leading role in the Democrats' return to the majority. While she won this leadership battle, she made important concessions, including a pledge to step down in 2022.

This book would be of interest to scholars studying gender and politics, Brexit and the ACA, and U.K. and U.S. politics. It adds to the literature exploring gender effects on leadership perceptions. The focus on loyalty, respect, and support is important, as is the analysis of competing gendered expectations that women must adhere to in order to survive. Extremely rich details are offered throughout. The methodological approach used to systematically assess the gendered tightrope, however, could be clearer. Pelosi's case study includes more supporting evidence regarding the gendered tightrope than does May's, where the inclusion of systematically derived examples proves relatively lacking. Nevertheless, this is a very interesting examination and should be of interest to many readers.

## References

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