‘Not fit to be president’: Hillary Clinton and our problem with older women


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‘Not fit to be president’: Hillary Clinton and our problem with older women

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Since Hillary Clinton launched her first US Presidential campaign in 2007, the vitriol directed towards her has been heavily grounded in sexism. Former President Barack Obama recently commented on the key challenge to Clinton’s campaign and all women with political aspirations: “There’s a reason why we haven’t had a woman president; that we as a society still grapple with what it means to see powerful women.”

Harsh criticism and mockery is directed at all Presidential contenders. Donald Trump, with his mystifying hair, reality television foray, and outlandish remarks, has also been the subject of ridicule.

Most of the attacks on Clinton are nevertheless related to the fact that she is a woman and tap into wider sexist beliefs about the inability of women to lead. Clinton has been described by male commentators as a “shouter”, she’s been said to remind male voters of their “nagging wives”, and others, including the keepers of Trump’s Twitter account have pondered how she will “satisfy America” if she can’t “satisfy her husband”.

Now, after a bout of pneumonia that included a public fainting spell, speculation about Clinton’s physical and mental weakness is ramping up.

In August, a range of assertions about Clinton’s health were already circulating. There were claims that she “can’t walk” and needs assistance, “can’t think” and is “often confused”, “can’t see” (because of double vision from a stroke), “has had multiple seizures on camera”, and “wears long coats to
camouflage her adult diapers”. Wilder explanations for her perceived unusual behaviour include hidden diagnoses of Parkinson’s Disease and Multiple Sclerosis.

Some articles speculate that at Clinton’s “advanced age” of 68 she is now too frail to manage a high pressure role. The hashtag #ZombieHillary has been in use on Twitter to criticise Clinton’s “tired” appearance, especially in the past week, while she has still been recovering from pneumonia. Tweets have insinuated that Clinton is under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and questioned how someone so “weak” will be able to run a country.

The only previous President who was older than Clinton on his inauguration was Ronald Reagan at 69 years and 345 days. Nevertheless, Trump at 70 years of age, is older than Clinton and would become the oldest President on inauguration in American history. Bernie Sanders, Clinton’s former Democratic Party rival, is seven years older than her.

If advanced age is understood as a barrier to effective governance as a politician, why has there been less concern and speculation about the impairments that Clinton’s older male rivals may be suffering? If illness is a concern, where was the discussion of Sanders’ hernia surgery? The likely answer is that people are not concerned about an older President as much as they are troubled by a female President.

At the bottom of many of the health and age concerns expressed about Hillary are negative stereotypes about women’s rightful purpose and inability to perform certain demanding roles that are
more suited to men.

There is a long history of women being infantilised, for example. The accusations that Clinton wears “adult diapers” are designed to construct her as child-like and incapable of controlling even her own toileting. (This rumour was sparked by the time taken for Clinton to visit the women’s bathroom—which was located much further away than the men’s facilities—during the third Democratic debate.)

While we might commend the strength and commitment of a person who continued a rigorous public event schedule during a bout of pneumonia, Clinton’s illness has instead been flipped into a marker of her fragility.

Ideas about the delicate constitution of women in both body and mind have typically been used to explain their unsuitability for everything from university education to military service. The suggestions that Clinton is too weak to even walk unaided or to think without becoming befuddled imagines her as more like a grandmother in need of care than a formidable world leader.

The bind for Clinton, and for any other female politician, is that attempts to counteract such characterisations of women leaders as weak are met with criticisms of unfeminine behaviour. This ranges from the demonisation of Clinton’s voice as loud, “shrill” and “shrieking” to judgement of her ageing body and face, which are no longer seen to meet the youthful ideal. This point is graphically evident in a grotesque portrait in which Clinton’s unkempt hair is grey, wrinkles line her face, and her gums have receded to reveal long and pointed teeth.

The inauguration of the first African American President in 2009 was a momentous occasion that marked a symbolic, and to some degree, actual transformation in race relations in the United States. The bitter struggle to elect the first woman President in 2016 seems much harder won. It also likely indicates that discomfort with powerful women will continue far into the future, regardless of whether or not Clinton succeeds.