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Commentary: For voters, fantasy candidate trumped reality

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Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump during the second presidential debate at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri on October 9, 2016.

By Lawrence D. Blum



Commentary: For voters, fantasy candidate trumped reality (http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/20161202_Commentary_For_voters

I am a psychoanalyst, and my patients have taught me something about the recent presidential election that the pundits are not talking about: the political parties are gendered. The Republican party is masculine, and the Democratic party is feminine.

A young gay lawyer talked with wonder about the fact that he used to try to be a loyal member of the Republican party, despite its

hostility toward gay rights. He felt that by adhering to the GOP, with its embrace of guns, violence, and economic self-interest, he would bolster his then-tenuous sense of masculinity.



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A professor from Mexico told me that Latinas voted for Donald Trump in surprising numbers, given his efforts to alienate them.



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She immediately suggested an explanation: In the Hispanic macho culture in which she grew up, women find self-



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important, macho men attractive, even when the women know it's just bluster. Trump, she pointed out, represents the party of self-aggrandizing men, who figuratively wave their genitalia around for others to see.



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Hearing my patients' inner thoughts leads me to a conclusion that as a psychoanalyst I should perhaps have anticipated. Along with the many other important factors that influence voters (the economy, the environment, civil rights, immigration, etc.), there is the phallus, and the advantage goes to whomever appears to possess one. It's only a fantasy? No matter, it's an influential one.

Recognizing that the GOP is the party of masculinity leads to consideration of the Democratic party as the feminine party. The human unconscious has no hesitation about gender stereotyping, and the description fits. The Democratic party has been much more interested in taking care of others, a traditionally more feminine concern, than has the GOP. It is the party that has advocated for health insurance, parental leave, unemployment insurance, Social Security, and food stamps - the party of the welfare state, the giving mother.

A great deal of data suggests that this largesse is much

appreciated by most Americans, as long as it is going to people they see as being like themselves. If it benefits people of color or immigrants, however, many white Americans react as though they are older siblings watching favors being showered upon the inferior, undeserving younger siblings of the American family.



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They become furious with an unfair, irresponsible mother, represented by the Democratic party. (Republican-driven welfare programs for corporations seem to be immune to this sort of criticism.)

Phallic power can be attributed to women as well as men. For example, Britain's Margaret Thatcher and Germany's Angela Merkel both became popular heads of state; it is no coincidence that both were perceived to be tough women, "iron ladies." But Hillary Clinton did not run as an "iron lady." She failed to convince voters that she would wave a magic wand for their collective benefit. For many, her perceived lack of anger and fight, her skilled neutrality, felt disappointing, suggesting the possession of no magic at all. Nor did she draw on the traditional emotional strength of the Democratic party, as she did not succeed in convincing voters that she would be a loving, giving mother who would take care of them. No wishful, hopeful fantasy was conveyed - just careful attention to reality.

When faced with threat, anxiety, and uncertainty, people want the benefit of phallic magic. In our shared, vital, fantasy world not having or receiving it leaves us in a sorry state. For that reason, it seems clear that many voters were willing to forgive Donald Trump his remarkable (and abusive) phallic excesses in the hope of benefiting from his presumed phallic magic.

There is a broader lesson to be learned from this election. Issues may be important. Reality may be important. But reality seldom trumps fantasy. If the Democrats want to improve their chances in the next election, they will need to pay more attention to voter psychology, especially to unconscious feelings and fantasies.



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The party that has the most immediate connection to voter emotion, and participates most skillfully in voter fantasy, has a tremendous advantage. We voters may be adults, but we are also irrational children, fervently hoping the Wizard of Oz will be real.

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