

EDUCATION



# Did gender shape the grilling of the 'gal from Penn' and other university presidents?

Some wonder whether male college presidents would have been questioned as aggressively.



## The Philadelphia Inquirer

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(From left) Harvard President Claudine Gay, then-University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) President Sally Kornbluth during a hearing of the H... [Read more](#)  
Mark Schiefelbein / AP

by Zoe Greenberg and Susan Snyder  
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As the minutes counted down during the congressional hearings last week on antisemitism on college campuses, U.S. Rep. Glenn Grothman interrupted Harvard president Claudine Gay.

“I’ll give you one more question because I want to go to the gal from Penn,” said Grothman (R., Wis.), referring to [University of Pennsylvania](#) president Liz Magill.

Within hours, the three female university presidents who testified before the Committee on Education and the Workforce were roundly criticized, including by the White House and the governor of Pennsylvania. [Magill resigned](#) four days later. In the days since, the questions raised at the hearings continued to reverberate beyond academia: How should [hate speech be handled](#) on college campuses and what [role, if any, should donors play](#) in determining school policy?

Others asked another question: Would the same criticism have been leveled had those presidents been men?

With so much at stake, observers and scholars said gender may not have been the driving factor in what happened during the three-plus hours of testimony on Dec. 5. At the same time, they pointed to the ways gender colored the congressional exchanges and ensuing backlash, with Grothman’s casual reference to “the gal from Penn” serving as one striking example. Grothman did not respond to a request for comment.

“It’s indicative of the lesser authority that a female college president carries,” said Andrea Press, a professor of sociology and media studies at the University of Virginia. “Is he going to say the ‘dude from Philadelphia’ if the president was a man? I don’t think so.”

» **READ MORE:** [What to know about the congressional investigation into antisemitism at Penn and other universities](#)

## A minority among university presidents

Over the last week, scholars such as Press and higher education observers have found themselves pondering that fundamentally unanswerable question: If those called to testify had been male — as 70% of elite university presidents are — would the hearings and their aftermath have gone differently?

“It’s hard to ascribe direct motive. But none of what happened on Tuesday happened without a great deal of planning,” said Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education, a Washington-based higher education advocacy group. Mitchell said it was “absolutely not an accident” that the congressional committee chose to focus on three female presidents, all with relatively short tenures. (The female president of Columbia University, who began her job in July, declined the invitation, [citing a scheduling conflict](#).)

Asked why these particular presidents were selected, a spokesman for the committee directed The Inquirer to a [Jewish Insider](#) story in which chair Virginia Foxx (R., N.C.) said the schools had been chosen because they were “at the center of the rise in antisemitic protests.”

“The consideration of a university president’s gender played absolutely no role in the committee’s selection process for the hearing,” the committee spokesperson said.

Just 30% of the country’s 146 elite research universities are led by women, and just 6% are led by women of color, according to a 2023 [Women’s Power Gap](#) report from the Eos Foundation. The Ivy League is an exception: Before Magill resigned, six of eight were run by women. Still, nearly 40% of the top universities have never had a female president.

To be sure, scholars said, an alternate reality may have produced identical results. University presidents, male and female, have long been subject to congressional ire, and the most aggressive questioner at the hearing was a woman, U.S. Rep. Elise Stefanik, a Republican from New York. But that doesn’t mean gender bias was absent.

“Some of the level of disrespect shown to these presidents who are women, I think gender was also at play,” said Risa Lieberwitz, a professor of labor and employment law at Cornell University and general counsel for the American Association of University Professors.

Ultimately much of what happened was a carefully choreographed performance, with both the questioners and those questioned attempting to

control the narrative, in part by playing with what academics refer to as the “gendered expectations” of the audience, scholars said.

Once the university presidents accepted the invitation to testify, they likely spent hours with their lawyers, conferring over the best language to use, Press said. The law firm WilmerHale prepared both Gay and Magill and also met with MIT’s president, Sally Kornbluth. At the hearing, they seemed careful to present themselves in ways that might deflect criticisms often lobbed at women in authority, dressing neutrally and trying to “sound calm and rational and as unemotional as possible,” Press said.

Yet that perceived strategy ran headfirst into Stefanik’s push for an outraged response to what she described as calls for genocide of Jews on college campuses.

“That kind of speech perhaps demands an emotional response,” Press said, “which they may be more unwilling to give as female public figures of great authority.”

## **‘She must think this is funny’**

Some also wondered whether the ensuing donor backlash, featuring mostly male mega-donors, was influenced by the gender of those in charge. Bill Ackman, a billionaire Harvard donor who has furiously criticized the university

for [not taking his advice](#), seemed to say as much, [arguing recently](#) that Gay was hired for DEI reasons and that she and other presidents “find themselves in a role that they would likely not have obtained were it not for a fat finger on the scale.”

As the congressional exchanges ricocheted across the internet, gender also played a role in how the clips were interpreted, said [Joe Salvatore](#), a professor of educational theater at New York University. In one example, observers mocked Magill for smiling through Stefanik’s questions.

“Liz Magill is smiling, she must think this is funny,” Salvatore said, summarizing the commentary. But, he said, “Women are socialized to smile through difficult moments all the time.”

Salvatore’s work involves creating and evaluating performances of heated political exchanges — such as the [2016 Hillary Clinton/Donald Trump debate](#) and [Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony](#) — but reversing the genders. Using

direct transcripts and the same gestures and body language of those involved in real life, he casts people in opposite gender roles, seeking to clarify for viewers how gender and race impact their reactions to political events. He said his lab has been discussing the antisemitism hearing in that context.

Ultimately, the hearings and their fallout were shaped by a range of complicated factors.

“I think an underlying motive was to embarrass higher education and to use [the issue of] antisemitism to put three higher education leaders in the least favorable light possible,” said Mitchell, of the American Council on Education.

Asked why the committee would choose women to try to achieve that, Mitchell responded: “I never underestimate misogyny.”

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