

# Still Waiting for Madame President

Hillary Clinton and the Oval Office

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## Abstract

This essay investigates gender in politics through the prism of Hillary Clinton's 2008 campaign for the Democratic nomination. It looks at the reactions to that campaign in the media, both in 2008 and as a probable second Clinton campaign emerges for 2016. Topics explored include whether the reactions to Clinton's campaigns are generic or specific to Clinton herself, and whether gender remains a limiting force in American political life.

**Keywords** Gender in politics, Hillary Clinton, American elections, equality, public discourse

In 2008, enthused and confused by Hillary Clinton's battle for the Democratic nomination, observers contemplated how demographic markers affected presidential campaigns. This entailed journeys considering the realms of sexism, racism, ageism, and religious bigotry, though this essay will concentrate on gender in politics, especially as it is constructed in public discourse. The 2008 primaries spotlighted how gender and politics interact. Clinton seemed set to become America's first female president, as women voted for her in

droves, putting “eighteen million cracks” in the glass ceiling (Clinton, in Milbank, 2008). Revisiting 2008 is particularly relevant, as Hillary Clinton will probably run in 2016.

Clinton’s 2008 campaign showed that substantive gender equality in politics was close. Clinton virtually tied the Democratic primary contest with Obama, signaling a diminution of the exclusion of women and African Americans from politics (Cheever, in Morrison, 2008). Sarah Palin’s campaign for vice president arguably confirmed the bipartisan passing of gender prejudice. Seen a generation after the 1964 film comedy *Kisses for My President*, in which female president Leslie McCloud disempowered her man for comic enthrallment, this augured momentous change. Sometimes popular culture provides predictive powers.

Election 2008 spotlighted the flux of contemporary attitudes on gender and race. With no incumbent from either party, the field was open. Outstanding candidates, Clinton and Barack Obama allowed Americans to consider if sex and race still mattered in public space. After 2008 analysts wondered how much public discourse had changed, substantially and tonally, and become “post-racial” or “post-gender”. This essay focusses on Clinton’s pursuit of the presidency and what her campaign says about gender and politics. Exploring the interworking of gender, media, and representations in the public sphere, sources used in this essay include news-media articles and their electronic responses and opinion surveys.

Aspiring woman leaders must tread a precarious balance between power and empathy. Female political roles tend to accentuate the rule-keeping and fair play associated with empathetic contests. Oppositely, male ideas of power contain essences of behaviorally expedient domination and anything goes: better to fight dirty and win than nurture moral superiority and lose (Ehrenreich, 2008; Faludi 2008). Female ideas of power hold consensual elements: a first among equals. Arguably, there is a gap in culture between a “Who does she think she is?” where feelings are considered, and an anything-goes “Who does he think he is?” These ideas endure in ways which belie the rhetoric of equality. Coalitions of the historically-disempowered are often more disparate and fragile than those built by ideology. Precisely here woman presidential candidates face obstacles. The power system is evidentially gendered, leaving less room for a candidate who is not male and not white. Gloria Steinem

claims that “Gender is probably the most restricting force in American life” (Steinem, 2008). Steinem’s words arguably held in 2008 and will probably echo in 2016.

A “double bind” of mutual exclusives separates the attributes of a good leader and a good woman (Lithwick, in Morrison, 2008: 179-80). Femininity undermines leadership, making the aspirant a stranger to herself and compromising her credibility (Tannen, in Morrison, 2008: 127). Women candidates tread warily: uniting woman voters can be undermined by the need to lead effectively, undercutting expectations of equality. In 2008 women expected different standards of themselves than they expected from men. A March 2008 CBS poll (CBS, 2008) found slightly more women than men (35% against 34%) judged that America was not ready for a female president, and that people they knew were disinclined to vote for women (47% of women and 44% of men), consistent with other polls. Moreover, in a supposed “postfeminist” era, many women questioned the importance of voting en bloc (Zernicke, 2008).

Conversely, 2008 polls and results showed disproportional support for Clinton’s campaign by women, raising the question of whether her candidacy was generic for the groups she was assumed as representing (a female candidate), or whether it was specific to the candidate herself (a candidate who is female). The presumption of the electability of a woman appears to be tempered by the attributes of the candidate; a process which often seemed to dominate the primaries. Clinton suffered and suffers endless microanalysis over her marital role, her qualifications, her femininity, her sexual orientation, her emotional life, her focus, and her judgment which left her integrity fragmented (*Critical Mass*, 2008; Chozick and Alter, 2014). Each of these fragments held something for everyone – the chance of a positive, or the potential for a negative marker. Danish Social Democrat Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt suffered shades of the same treatment prior to the 2011 Danish parliamentary elections.

Polling on gender in presidential politics since 2008 has been sparse, though that is changing as candidates like Clinton gear up for 2016. A March 2014 Gallup Poll analyzing her “shadow campaign” surveyed Clinton’s top selling points, and found that nearly 20% of respondents felt her unique quality was that she was potentially the first woman president (double the second-ranking point).

Four percent of respondents stated they didn't want a woman president: the same proportion reported they wouldn't vote for Clinton because she was a Democrat. Gallup's findings echoed a January 2014 Rasmussen poll, in which three-quarters of respondents stated they thought it likely that the US would see its first female president within ten years. Less than one-in-five respondents thought that a female president was unlikely within ten years. These percentages indicated less resistance towards women candidates than in 2008 polls: one-sixth of respondents had changed their minds and by 2014 considered a woman president likely (Newport, 2014; Rasmussen Reports, 2014). Tempering the modestly overt prejudice, however, some respondents named negative factors which probably contained indirect gender prejudice, such as the 6% who found Clinton unqualified or the 3% who just didn't like her (Graham, 2014).

March 2014 Pew polls also found that one-third of Americans saw Clinton's gender as a positive. Conversely, one-in-five still believed Clinton's gender would hurt her, while nearly half thought it wouldn't matter. Pew's poll chimed with Rasmussen's findings that gender had become less of a factor since 2008 (Pew, 2014; Rasmussen 2014). Nevertheless the cards are "still stacked against women in politics" (Madkour, 2010), with a fifth of voters seeing Clinton's gender negatively. Moreover, 4% is less than the margin of victory in the 2000, 2004, and 2012 presidential elections.

The instinct for candidates to keep something — some inner essence — back can result from the intense public scrutiny. For Clinton, the quest for "electable" familiarity opposes the need for privacy — for some secrecy. This privacy promotes rumor, and everything mentioned in the public domain sticks: Clinton has been called a vacuum, a phony, and calculating, with writers specializing in smearing her selling hundreds of thousands of books (Fuller, 2014). Aligned with this is the tendency to "read" women's suitability for office through the "three H's: Hair, Hemlines, and Husbands" matrix, which constructs women candidates differently from male candidates, whose appearance and family status is downplayed (Kornblut, 2009; Applebaum, 2014). Female candidates must consider these factors in their campaign storytelling. Scrutiny of her family, her authenticity, and supposed artificiality have surfaced in connection with Clinton's likely 2016 campaign

over Chelsea Clinton's role as proxy, her relationship to Bill, and her effective fundraising (Dowd, 2014).

Much Clinton critique stems from her multi-dimensionality. Complexity is natural for a sexagenarian. People evolve with their surroundings, their relationships, and as circumstances alter. Clinton has been through law school, motherhood, policy advocacy, administration, and political service. "Containing" Clinton, given the balance of contemporary female roles and the necessity of selling complexity as simplicity, would be tough even in a neutral media environment. The assumption that femininity disadvantaged Clinton suggests that aspiring female candidates need to play to masculine stereotypes like decisiveness and hawkishness. Depth of personality is a mark of experience, not of duplicity — yet the media often ignore this.

Media polarization has intensified the perils for Clinton. Talk radio has chased her mercilessly since the early 90s, peaking with Rush Limbaugh's contention that while American culture saw men as "more authoritative, accomplished and distinguished" when they aged, it was questionable whether people would "want to watch a woman get older before their eyes" (Nason, 2007). Gender prejudice increases when age factors in: news media aired images of a drawn Clinton during 2008 campaigning. These citations indicate the hurdles which female candidates must overcome. Eight years on, in 2016, as a grandmother, Clinton's age will figure.

Even had Clinton won the White House in 2008, commentators would probably have feted the "Bill-helped-Hillary" narrative to devalue her victory: men's spouses attract less scrutiny than women's. But for that victory to have happened, Clinton's path to office would have needed strong support from younger women, African Americans, and the entertainment industry. Clinton failed in this for reasons of strategy, and through the separation of gender and ethnicity coalitions. African American women faced the dilemma of voting on gender or racial lines. Most opted for Obama while sympathizing with Clinton. Clinton lost support among younger Democrats as she was seen as a *lesser* change than Obama, in a year in which "change" blew strong in the primaries and the general election.

TV star Oprah Winfrey endorsed Obama, seeing in him greater renewal than Clinton. In May 2007, Winfrey stated that her endorse-

ment was “worth more than any check I can write”. Winfrey’s endorsement connected Obama to the six million people, predominantly women, who watched *Oprah* daily. It resounded widely, confirming that an African American male could dream of highest office. The *New York Times*’ report of Oprah’s endorsement attracted several hundred comments online, two of which stood out (Zeleny, 2007). “Oprah is the most powerful and influential woman in America. Pelosi, Rice, and Billary (Bill and Hillary Clinton) bow to her”, by “Elliot” indicated Winfrey’s influence. Conversely, “Shame on you Oprah, all the time I thought you were a woman first and then black”, by “Maria”, showed how hard it was for some African Americans to choose between gender and color, but most comments favored Winfrey’s endorsement.

Over forty million 18 to 30 year-olds “Millennial” eligible voters fed the change dynamic in 2008; many cast their ballots (Teixeira, 2008). This technologically-savvy cohort expressed strong tolerance towards racial and sexual diversity and took equality for granted. Clinton labored with this group: because of her age; because she ran as an experienced pair of hands; and because she ran as heiress to the “Roaring Nineties” economic growth. Young voters hastened change, and exercised a cultural shift — pushing race and gender from center stage. Clinton attracted less support from this “post-feminist” and “post-civil rights” generation (Caldwell, 2014).

Clinton will be 69 years old come election 2016. Having served Obama as Secretary of State, she risks being classed as a candidate of incumbency and continuity (Kornblut 2011). Incumbency is a cross Clinton must bear; her paradox is that the experience she has gained helps legitimize voters’ choices in supporting her and the fundamental change that her presidency would represent, while conversely identifying her as a candidate steeped in the history of the last generation. The contours of a change and continuity narrative in election 2016 are naturally still unformed; though the upcoming (2014) midterm elections suggest that it will be fought against a background of seesaw political change. Vice President Joe Biden isn’t seen as a strong candidate for 2016, and the Republican race is currently wide open. Such open races encourage “change” candidates to run. This would hinder Clinton, as it did in 2008; rather than being portrayed as the radical re-shaper of gender in politics, she

risks being painted as pragmatic, centrist, process-obsessed, and the status-quo candidate (Applebaum, 2014).

A minority of 2008 voters recalled the equality struggles of the sixties firsthand, and that minority will shrink in 2016. Clinton's foreign policy hawkishness as supporter of the 2003-2011 War in Iraq, service in Obama's first administration, and recent calls for a more hands-on foreign policy will probably not inspire younger voters (Goldberg, 2014). Electing a woman to the White House in 2008 because she is a woman was seen as less urgent for younger women than for their mothers and grandmothers. This imperative — because she is a woman — will probably diminish towards 2016.

In 2008 older veterans of the civil rights era weren't fired up over Clinton's candidacy. "Why Women Hate Hillary," by historian Susan Douglas, charts a group of middle-class, middle-aged women at a dinner who became increasingly ambivalent towards Clinton. Douglas writes:

We sat around the dinner table, a group of 50-something progressive feminists, talking to a friend from England about presidential politics. We were all for Hillary, weren't we, he asked. Hillary? We hated Hillary. He was taken aback. Weren't we her base? Wasn't she one of us?

Even prior to serving as Secretary of State (2009-13), some argued that Clinton smacked of the warmongering "patriarch" who was female, rather than a feminist. Douglas' article spurred a ten-month debate, attracted over 160 intensely conflicting comments (Douglas, 2007). Clinton was regarded as the lesser of two evils, her gender was seen as secondary, as a hawk who happened to be female, and not as "the one". American, meanwhile, was "not ready for a female president". Many posters were ambivalent towards Clinton; she was seen as irrelevant. More positively, one post noted that women were their own worst enemies in not wanting Clinton to succeed, another that Clinton was undoubtedly a feminist but definitely not constrained as a stereotype, and a third that she was a "woman fighting in a predominantly male world".

Many critics hit Clinton from the left; she hadn't opposed the Iraq war. Some grass-roots Democrats were disappointed over Bill Clinton-era "New Democrat" centrism and wanted payback. Repeat-

edly (and still) internet comments questioned Clinton's femininity, which, coupled with Barack Obama's anti Iraq-war stance, seemed an inversion of female "Venus" and male "Mars" gender stereotypes. Observers argued that Clinton's 2008 campaign director Mark Penn deliberately used the "Mars Strategy" to compensate for voter belief that female candidates are softer on foreign policy (Kornblut, 2011), thereby garbing her as a candidate of Bush-era continuity rather than change. Clinton-the-Hawk narratives will be reemployed in 2016 if she runs, presaged in her summer 2014 critique of Obama's second administration policy softness over Syria (Goldberg 2014).

The revolutionary effect of new technology challenges insider candidates. The growth of social media broadened the potential and diminished the control of public space. For instance, reader feedback became immediate and unfiltered, leveling hierarchies and diminishing civility in the mediation of ideas between journalists and readers. Media articles generated hundreds of combative responses. A *CNN* article scrutinizing Chelsea Clinton's role in Clinton's campaign, spawned five hundred responses in two days. Clinton's reticence towards taking questions in the 2008 Iowa primaries generated similar, strident volumes of responses (*CNN Political Ticker*, 2008). The language used was significantly more confrontational than in printed responses. This new social media public space developed an "anything goes" culture, leaving celebrity candidates more vulnerable than in previous contests, especially where they sought to break gender or racial molds. Internet analysts argued that connective technologies had refashioned politics in 2008 and empowered the loudest, most radical voices. Clinton suffered; she was seen as representing the intensely polarized Bush-Clinton era, while Obama galvanized anti-establishment and anti-Washington support among younger voters. Similar clashes between continuity and change are brewing for 2016, with new public space even more important.

Will election 2016 repeat 2008? Then, Clinton's campaign momentum finally halted, leaving commentators and journalists to ask why name recognition, front-runner status and huge fundraising ability failed. Was it her policy proposals, her stance on Iraq, her data-driven campaigning, her sloth, her denial of gender, her arrogance in the face of Barack Obama's challenge, or her campaign



style (Calmes, 2008)? Was it gender, aggravated by technology? One journalist wondered if the near-dead heat between Clinton and Obama showed how far women had come, or how far they still had to go (Orenstein, 2008). Tiny margins matter in the US political system and gender prejudice can be decisive. Camille Paglia claimed that Clinton's feminism represented "Male-bashing feminism": Clinton's problems resulted from her personality and not her gender (Paglia, 2008).

Other voices muddied the issue of whether *that* woman or *all* women would suffer gender discrimination. Clinton's flaws were surely amplified by the media. Respected media and commentators employed a fundamentally sexist approach — in terms of imagery — towards Clinton's campaign (Cocco, 2008; Seelye & Bosman, 2008). MSNBC's Chris Matthews equated her with a "she-devil" and Mike Barnicle — also from (liberal) MSNBC — suggested Clinton's concession speech had the air of "looking like everyone's first wife standing outside a probate court". Andrew Sullivan compared Clinton with the knife-wielding female character in *Fatal Attraction* (1987). NBC's news anchor Katie Couric blogged — accurately, and gaining much support — on the centrality of sexism in America (Couric, 2008). This sexism — reflective of inherent collective bias or refractive of individual opinions — mars politics and the public sphere more than racism, as reflected in 2008 polls (Seelye & Bosman, 2008; Pew, 2008b).

Subliminal attitudes towards gender lead to the expectation that candidates will be men permeating political culture with masculine values, despite progress towards substantive gender equality. Topical factors are also play in: the nature of the campaign and the candidates themselves. Clinton may have won if she had pushed a narrative of herself as embodying change as a woman: a mistake she may repeat in 2016 (Kornblut, 2011; Traister 2014). Clinton will have to analyze why she was unsuccessful in 2008, and what she must do to avoid failure in 2016. Though 2014 polls suggest it matters less than in 2008, gender remains important at the margins.

Already under the microscope, Clinton will probably formally announce her candidacy in early 2015. The attacks have begun. Possible Republican candidate Rand Paul has reprised the "Bill back-in-the-White-House" issue. Republican strategist Karl Rove has suggested that a 2012 blood clot impaired Clinton's health (Beinart,

2014). There is another parallel to 2008, taking us back to Clinton's personality: how could Clinton "present herself as someone hungry to serve rather than someone entitled to office?" (Chozick, 2014). Can a "crown princess" be a revolutionary choice? In March 2014, around three-quarters of Democrats supported Clinton as nominee (Pew, 2014). Yet, Clinton's inevitability was not enough in 2008 to hold off the buzz and fizz of the Obama campaign. Potent women challengers may emerge in 2016 to energize the Democratic field, "normalize" gender's role in politics, and help explore whether Clinton's candidacy is generic or not (Traister, 2014; Franke-Ruta, 2014). While gender might be less of an overt factor, there is a degree of consensus that female candidates are judged by different criteria than male contenders and are more liable to personal scrutiny.

Fifty years ago, the film *Kisses for My President* (1964) created images of a female president in Leslie McCloud. President McCloud is finally undermined by the strains her family suffers because she must prioritize office above family, in a comedic inversion of the patriarchal norm. McCloud's downfall is her gender: she becomes pregnant and gives up office, restoring "normality." Despite the objectionable stereotyping, by casting a woman as president the film reached ahead in political time. Real life still lags behind. In 2016, it remains to be seen whether Hillary Clinton — or another Madame President — can catch up with President Leslie McCloud.

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