

The 2008 Elections and the Role of Gender Among Young Voters

Joanna Lian Pearson

Donna Rouner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/jcred>

Recommended Citation

Pearson, Joanna Lian and Rouner, Donna (2009) "The 2008 Elections and the Role of Gender Among Young Voters," *Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/jcred/vol24/iss2/4>

This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development* by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact lasalar@stjohns.edu.

THE 2008 ELECTIONS AND THE ROLE OF GENDER AMONG YOUNG VOTERS

JOANNA LIAN PEARSON & DONNA ROUNER*

The presidential election process of 2008 was a study in conflict diversity, the understanding of how different groups exist in a hierarchy of inequality.¹ This study looks at how gender schemas exist in the minds of first-time voters to determine whether they could elect a woman for president of the United States and the reason(s) why or why not. Do the schemas prevalent in our society, many of which are situated through media representation, allow the minds of young Americans to conceive of a president that is not male?

According to a Gloria Steinem *New York Times* Op-Ed,

“Gender is probably the most restricting force in American life Black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race were allowed to mark a ballot, and generally have ascended to positions of power, from the military to the boardroom, before any women”²

Katha Pollitt, a writer for *The Nation*, agrees black men got the vote first, but says they could be lynched for using it.³ Pollitt also writes that Shirley Chisholm, the black Congresswomen who ran for president in 1972, “famously [wrote], ‘[o]f my two handicaps, being female put many more obstacles in my path than being black.’”⁴

Steinem suggests the gender barrier is not taken seriously, but Pollitt maintains that that does not mean barriers for other marginalized groups are

* Joanna Lian Pearson is an Assistant Professor at Colorado State University; Donna Rouner is a Professor at Colorado State University.

¹ See Katha Pollitt, *The Weepy Witch and the Secret Muslim*, THE NATION, Feb. 4, 2008, at 10, available at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080204/pollitt> (describing the 2008 presidential election as having the potential to become “a competition between race and gender—Frederick Douglass versus Elizabeth Cady Stanton”).

² Gloria Steinem, Op-Ed., *Women are Never Front-Runners*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 8, 2008, at A23.

³ Pollitt, *supra* note 1 (“Yes, black men got the vote first, although they could be lynched for using it.”).

⁴ *Id.*

less serious. She says it just means that public expression of the barrier of racism "is beyond the pale in a way that the public expression of misogyny is not."⁵

One way to understand the role gender played in the 2008 presidential election is to examine young voters, in particular those voting for the first time in a presidential election, to assess their fresh views of the election, including their use of, and views about, media during the election. These voters hold schemas relative to their perceptions of the ideal president, schemas that may or may not match the candidates who competed in the campaign.

How do those who are new or less experienced to voting in a presidential election put a face to their idea of what is presidential or view the attributes of a president? Do the schemas include variations for gender? And what does this say about a nation whose very doctrine is steeped in the democratic notion of social equality and unalienable rights? Is the equality of inequality an engagement in oppression Olympics?

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

In previous studies, schema theory, such as media representation, has been used to measure political preference. Schema theory suggests that "[i]n contexts of historical political subordination and low de facto legitimacy, descriptive representation helps create a social meaning of 'ability to rule' and increases the attachment to the polity of members of the group."⁶ In addition, studies indicate that women are far more likely than men to be "gender conscious" in their evaluation of a candidate or a preferred representative.⁷ On the other hand, some men have been heard to echo the thought: "Any man before a woman."⁸

In one study, Richard L. Fox and Eric R.A.N. Smith were unable to tell conclusively whether a candidate's sex played a role in voter decision-making, but they concluded that previous studies that determined there was no direct bias against female candidates were flawed.⁹ Women were not

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Jane Mansbridge, *Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent "Yes,"* 61 J. POL. 628, 628 (1999).

⁷ See Cindy Simon Rosenthal, *The Role of Gender in Descriptive Representation*, 48 POL. RES. Q. 599, 599 (1995) (stating that a "1993 survey of 416 individuals, suggest[s] that women are far more likely than men to be 'gender conscious' in their evaluation of a candidate").

⁸ Petti Fong, *Obama is Closing Gap with Three More Wins*, TORONTO STAR, Feb. 10, 2008, at A01.

⁹ Richard L. Fox & Eric R.A.N. Smith, *The Role of Candidate Sex in Voter Decision-Making*, 19 POL. PSYCHOL. 405, 405, 412 (1998). "Recent studies investigating the role of candidate sex in voter

often considered in the equation for understanding political communication. Domination by male candidates has led to hegemony and the fact that male ideas are dominant. In order to maintain control over the economic, political and cultural aspects of the public sphere, men's ideas have formed the consensus on the role and power of government, the place of civic culture and limits to participation that amalgamate to denote citizenship.

Kira Sanbonmatsu presents a gender schema theory that argues that voter's baseline preference is a standing predisposition, that voter gender partially shapes the baseline gender preference, and that baseline gender preference affects the vote decision.¹⁰ Political interest and political socialization has been connected to age, education, gender, and socio-economic background.

For as long as women have aspired to the Oval Office, citizens, pollsters, and reporters have argued that America is not yet ready for a woman president. Surveys regularly document that people say they are more likely to vote for men than for women in a presidential race.¹¹ Stereotypical beliefs about men and women also may affect attitudes about supporting a woman for president. Stereotypes can result in biased attitudes about a potential president's ability to handle issues.¹²

What about media? Was the mainstream press unbiased? Is media objectivity a myth? Or as some pundits asked, was the media so determined to find sexism around every corner in the 2008 race that when they could not find it, they invented it?¹³ Ted Brader found that political

decision-making have not found discrimination against women candidates." *Id.* at 405. However, many studies that seek to measure candidate sex in voter decision-making are flawed indicators of bias because they use a question that does not correctly reflect a respondent's true bias, or lack thereof. *Id.* at 412.

¹⁰ See Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Gender Stereotypes and Vote Choice*, 46 AM. J. POL. SCI. 20, 20 (2002) (arguing "many voters have a baseline gender preference to vote for male over female candidates, or female over male candidates[,] and that "this general predisposition or preference can be explained by gender stereotypes").

¹¹ See ERIKA FALK, WOMEN FOR PRESIDENT: MEDIA BIAS IN EIGHT CAMPAIGNS 143 (2007) A 1937 Gallup poll asked respondents if they would vote for a woman for president, "64 percent of respondents said that they would not vote for a woman." *Id.*

¹² See *id.* The 1937 Gallup poll asked respondents "[w]ould you vote for a woman for president if she were qualified in every other respect?" *Id.* Subsequent polls tracked similar wording and thus played to stereotypes that a woman is not qualified to be president because "[t]he use of the word 'other' clearly suggests to the respondent that simply being a woman makes one unqualified for the job [of president]." *Id.*

¹³ Tara Servatius, *Sexist or Racist? Take Your Pick*, CREATIVE LOAFING CHARLOTTE, Jan. 16, 2008, available at http://charlotte.creativeloafing.com/gyrobase/sexist_or_racist_take_your_pick/Content?oid=260373 ("The media is so determined to find racism and sexism around every corner in this [2008 presidential] race that when they can't find it, they invent it.").

ads motivate and persuade voters by appealing to emotion.¹⁴ Brader demonstrated that “cueing enthusiasm motivates participation and activates existing loyalties; and . . . cueing fear stimulates vigilance, increases reliance on contemporary evaluations, and facilitates persuasion.”¹⁵ According to *The Nation*, the media popularly and reductively caricatured Hillary Clinton as an “old, ugly, castrating witch-and-what-rhymes-with-it . . .”¹⁶ In addition, the Clinton campaign was criticized for “pimp[ing] out” Chelsea Clinton,¹⁷ Bill O’Reilly made reference to a lynching party when discussing Michelle Obama,¹⁸ and Sarah Palin was called both a beauty queen and a diva.¹⁹ Evan Thomas, in *Newsweek*, wrote: “It is true that reporters are susceptible to flash and charm; like most cynics, they are romantics in disguise.”²⁰ W. James Potter, in *Media Literacy*, wrote that: “The media spin reality to make it appear more exciting and thus attract people away from their real lives.”²¹ The press tends to portray women in stereotypical ways even when women themselves don’t describe themselves by such stereotypes. Women running for the U.S. Senate have been found to receive less coverage than men, to receive coverage relating to their viability, or lack thereof, rather than their positions, and to be reported as less viable than men.²² Although coverage of female candidates has shown greater focus on their family relationships and appearance than males, more equitable coverage has occurred during recent elections.²³

¹⁴ See Ted Brader, *Striking a Responsive Chord: How Political Ads Motivate and Persuade Voters by Appealing to Emotions*, 49 AM. J. POL. SCI. 388, 388 (2005) (demonstrating that “political ads can change the way citizens get involved and make choices simply by using images and music to evoke emotions.”).

¹⁵ *Id.* Brader used “two experiments conducted during an actual election” to make the findings. *Id.*

¹⁶ Pollitt, *supra* note 1.

¹⁷ See Katherine Q. Seelye, *NBC Makes News on Clintons, and Reports on It, Too*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 9, 2008, at A11 (reporting on an MSNBC guest host’s statement that Chelsea Clinton had been “pimped out” because she made phone calls to superdelegates on her mother’s behalf).

¹⁸ See Bob Cesca, Editorial, *Why Fox Must Fire O’Reilly*, CHI. SUN-TIMES, Feb. 23, 2008, at 10 (opining that Bill O’Reilly should be “fired for using the word ‘lynching’ in the context of a rant about Michelle Obama.”).

¹⁹ See Jackie Calmes, *Palin Gets Women’s Attention, Not Necessarily Their Support*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 31, 2008, at A1 (citing women’s interest in Palin’s unusual mix of traits, such as “hunter and onetime local beauty queen”); Maureen Dowd, Editorial, *Too Maverick: McCain Confronts the Palin Predicament*, PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, Oct. 30, 2008, at B-5 (referring to reported rumors that McCain aides called Palin a diva).

²⁰ Evan Thomas, *The Myth of Objectivity*, NEWSWEEK, Mar. 10, 2008, at 36.

²¹ W. JAMES POTTER, *MEDIA LITERACY* 159 (4th ed. 2008).

²² See Pollitt, *supra* note 1 (arguing against media coverage that has attacked Hillary Clinton “as an old, ugly, castrating witch-and-what-rhymes-with-it” rather than focusing on the issues and presenting her as a viable candidate).

²³ See FALK, *supra* note 11, at 60–61, 85–86. A study of candidates for governor in 1998 found “the press was more likely to focus on the age, personality, and appearance” of female candidates, while another study found the difference in coverage of candidate appearance in primary races for governor

II. METHODOLOGY

This research used a critical/cultural, ethnographic audience analysis methodology to determine young voters' schemas and the formation of schemas as knowledge structures or frameworks that organize an individual's memory. Schemas are general mental constructs that act on all of one's forms of information about people or events based on past experiences that enable the individual to draw inferences about the people or events that are congruent with previously formed schemas. Schemas about what is presidential and the definition of presidential identity, as viewed by twenty-eight first-time or second-time voting college students at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado, were studied. Next, the research determined those schemas that surround and define gender, as young people often view the world as gendered and males and females may process media information differently. Then, those schemas held specifically about Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin compared to Barack Obama and John McCain were studied.

The research was an attempt to determine how gender may have shaped the outcome of the election. The goal of this project was to measure the impact of gender on politics and in voting patterns. Research questions included:

Are political schemas of male and female candidates a basis for voting preferences?

Are gender schemas held as descriptive representation?

Does media content provide audience members with fair assessments of candidates given media representation that is a part of schema construction?

The people of Colorado have exhibited Republican, conservative trends. Demographic information provided answers about sex/gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic classification, party designation, family political party, and home region in the United States. Of the twenty-eight students with whom one-hour interviews were conducted, interviewees consisted of thirteen males and fifteen females. Of these, two females were Asian American, one female was Eurasian, one female was African American, one male was Hispanic American, one male was Spanish, and

and U.S. Senator in 2000 was not statistically significant. *Id.* at 85–86. Another study found that the media will focus on female candidates' families more than on those of male candidates; however, media may focus more on male candidates' families when the males introduce them into the campaign. *Id.* at 60–61.

twenty-two were Caucasian (eleven females and eleven males).

All of those interviewed were welcome to take part in the research and were from classes that included politics, persuasion, media and communication studies, and culture. Questions were divided into demographics, politics, gender, race and media perceptions, all of which overlapped greatly with perceptions of gender. Interviews occurred between June and October of 2008. Because of the effect of gender on politics, when the race appeared somewhat less astonishing after Clinton was no longer a contender, questions about Sarah Palin were added when she was confirmed as a candidate. Once Sarah Palin became front-page news, ideas about gender became front and center, even more so than before Hillary Clinton conceded. Questions about candidates' spouses in terms of popularity, how they carried themselves, their role as presidential spouses, and what types of things were said about them were also asked.

III. FINDINGS

Of the females, all were first-time voters with five identifying their politics as middle of the road, four as Republicans and five as Democrats (one Asian American woman was not eligible to vote in the U.S. elections, but her insight about American politics from the viewpoint of an "outsider" was keen). Of the males, four had voted in previous elections. One male identified himself as a middle of the road voter, three as Republicans, five as Democrats and two unknown at the time (they intended to vote).

A. Gendered Talk

In listening for gender specific pronouns such as "he" or "she" when speaking about a president, six of the females remained primarily neutral, six primarily used "he" or focused on the spouse as "she" or "her," and three of the females followed the language of the interviewer.

Only one female remained gender neutral throughout the entire interview process. Of the fourteen remaining females, the six who primarily used "he" self identified as Republicans. One interviewee felt that males were more trustworthy than females and that the spouse should "endorse her husband." Another female interviewee felt that a man would make a better president and the vice president is important because "if anything should happen to the president, the vice president is our main man."²⁴

²⁴ Interview on file with authors.

Although none of the males were completely gender neutral, seven of the thirteen men spoke using primarily gender-neutral language. If an interviewee primarily used gender-neutral language, he was considered gender neutral. Each male, however, eventually used a pronoun that referred to a woman at some point. For example, one interviewee used gender-neutral language when talking about the spouse (a place where almost all interviewees used a female pronoun), but when talking about the president's friends and associates, said: "The friends should be all types. People who agree with 'him.' People that disagree with 'him.'"²⁵ Another male interviewee used gender-neutral language until he provided philosophical explanations where he invoked gendered pronouns using "he" to discuss the president. Still another interviewee remained gender neutral when making generalizations, but used examples that were based on traditional gender roles. For example, this interviewee used the explanation of a "male" architect to make his point.

The remaining males blatantly used gender pronouns in their interviews. Out of these six males, two were Republicans and four were Democrats. One of these men said: "Men are more trustworthy and a man should be president of the United States."²⁶ Others used terms such as: "he has to be a good leader,"²⁷ and "his spouse should say the same things the president says."²⁸

B. Presidential Traits

On the whole, both sexes wanted the same characteristics in a president. They wanted an honest, charismatic, trustworthy, strong, good speaker. Of the president's spouse, they said they wanted someone who was supportive and understanding.

Six of the fifteen women felt that women were equal to men and there is no difference between the sexes. Of those women who felt there was a difference between men and women, the nine women felt women were more emotional and men were more logical. One said, "Women are softer and men are more trustworthy."²⁹ Another felt women were better problem solvers, but men knew how to prioritize problems and have a "fix it" mindset. While none of the women believed any job was gender specific,

²⁵ Interview on file with authors.

²⁶ Interview on file with authors.

²⁷ Interview on file with authors.

²⁸ Interview on file with authors.

²⁹ Interview on file with authors.

there was a correlation between the characteristics of an ideal president and what the interviewees felt were differences between men and women.

Only four of the men felt that men and women are equal. Four believed women plan more and are better organized. One felt women are better team players and communicate more openly in groups. Others felt women are more emotional and more caring, while men are more aggressive and take more risks, which are traits needed in a president. Still others felt men are stronger and lead more and that these too are traits needed in a president. Four thought the opposite of this, thinking that women are more trustworthy, yet one male felt men are more trustworthy.

C. Jobs by Gender

Several of the men felt that jobs in childcare services are female specific. Only two males provided a connection between their definition of the job of an ideal president and their ideas about gender. One said the president's job means being fearless and men have no fear factor.

One woman who described herself as a feminist said the job of president will remain a male job until women are more accepted. She said she would hate to have a woman president who was not respected by male peers in other countries. She said "if they would mock her and/or consider her unprepared and weak, especially in things such as war, it would be bad for the country and bad for women."³⁰

While there appears to be no connection between party affiliation and preconceived notions about gender, both sexes admitted men have more authority in society. Some interviewees, however, felt this might change as women break through the glass ceilings in society.

D. Press Coverage of Women

Most interviewees felt men receive more coverage than women, but they said the coverage depends on the topic. "Women get the soft, silly stories while media cover male candidates' issues more," according to one male interviewee.³¹ "It's the kind of stuff you don't care about such as what the female candidate wears or if someone calls her a pig."³² Another female interviewee felt that the entire campaign was "overdone" by the media. "Because we had two 'different' types, a black man and women, media

³⁰ Interview on file with authors.

³¹ Interview on file with authors.

³² Interview on file with authors.

didn't know what to do with it. Some tried to be fair but the whole effect was saying something about nothing while trying to be fair to women and minorities."³³ Another female interviewee, who said she was Republican, said the entire press coverage about Palin was about her Troopergate scandal rather than her abilities.³⁴

All in all, interviewees thought stereotypes about women, family roles and kids, and professionalism in the workplace was covered more in the media for women than for men. "Women will always be associated with the home and make less money than men," said a male interviewee. "Men know women want more power, but men don't want to give it up."³⁵

According to one first-time female interviewee, as the older generations die off, things will get better. She said older people are stuck in their ways and their ways are old-fashioned when it comes to the sexes, race and church. She said the younger generation is educated and prepared to accept more. Adding "[u]nited we stand might mean more."³⁶

When interviewees were asked about media dependence, they all said they got the news every day, at the very least by using the computer. All thought the media was biased and some thought it was too liberal. To the question about media representation, schemas and ideas about how society is organized, they, however, cited all types of media, friends (who get information from media or teachers) and parents. While most determined that the media could not be trusted, several thought Barack Obama was a Muslim or the Anti-Christ. When asked where they received this information, the majority stated "the media," as if the media were an authority.

Of the twenty-eight interviewees, only seven felt age, sex or race does not matter when considering a person for presidential office. The other twenty-one felt specific characteristics of sex, age or race do matter. Of the characteristic most talked about, age seemed to be the biggest negative factor; many thought McCain's age at seventy-two was "ancient." Others felt Palin could not run the country if something happened to McCain because of his age. These students wanted someone with experience to represent the country as president (women are seen as having less experience politically), but they wanted someone who could relate to their generation. The second highest imperative was concern for how other

³³ Interview on file with authors.

³⁴ Interview on file with authors.

³⁵ Interview on file with authors.

³⁶ Interview on file with authors.

nations would view a female, and that a male leader would have more prestige and power in conducting foreign affairs. All agreed about the importance of respect for the president outside of the United States.

While party affiliation is still an important predictor of vote choice, many more males would have voted for McCain with Sarah Palin as vice president than Hillary Clinton as president. It is important to note that these same males thought prior military involvement was a critical part of being president. The closest indication for why military experience was a priority had to do with a kind of manly prowess and authority.

It appears that typically men vote for men and women vote for women. Female interviewees were willing to cross party lines to vote for a woman, but only if she shared their same values. Women who did not like the male candidate who was running were willing to vote for the male to get a woman who shared their values. Interestingly, while women acknowledged that they knew they should not worry about the kids because a male candidate would not, most admitted that they had concerns about the kids of a national political appointee. Not one male mentioned the duties of women concerning their children, but many explained women's work as homework.

It also is clear that men and women focus on different aspects of a presidency. Strength is more important to men than being a mediator. And, it is clear that the time for women may not yet have arrived. While students, especially females, feel a woman president should be acceptable, both men and women see obvious hurdles for a woman president. One woman said, "We want a chance, but we want a fair chance. We want to be selected because we're good, not because we're women. A woman as a token is misogyny at its best."³⁷

IV. DISCUSSION

Although the young voters in this study did not express bias against women as presidential candidates, they suggested such bias in their language and in their use of exemplars and explanations about their responses to questions. Many appeared to hold schemas of the ideal president as male, although most were resolute that they believed gender was not a deterrent to the highest political office. This could be because these young voters are heuristically processing information using schemas of the ideal president that they have held from childhood, schemas of white

³⁷ Interview on file with authors.

males who are quite homogeneous in appearance, demeanor and popular appeal.

Males and females may process the media information about the presidential candidates differently, as females are found to process in a piecemeal fashion and males are found to process more heuristically. This means males use a few cues that they hold in their presidential schemas about the important qualities of a good president and, once they find those cues in a candidate, make a judgment about whether to process further. Females, on the other hand, process information in a way that is bit-by-bit and may possibly over analyze information, making judgments about information in a case-by-case manner.³⁸ Further, young voters did not specifically identify news coverage as necessarily biased against female candidates, even though considerable evidence exists in popular media that this is the case.³⁹

Clearly, political schemas of women are a basis for voting preferences; gender schemas are held as descriptive representations and, as part of schematic construction, media representations impact an individual's ability to assess a candidate. Whether the assessment is guided by media bias, perceptions of liberal media, or male stereotypes of females, the assessment would seem to provide an unfair, unbalanced choice. While the statement is true that "we've come a long way baby," apparently, at least in terms of first and second time voters on a college campus, women have not come far enough yet to hold office as president of the United States. As is usually assumed, if academia is a liberal bastion spewing liberal graduates, realism may be far more practical than untested idealism.

The 2008 presidential campaign was unique and provided historical firsts. It is hard to determine some of the specifics based on one measurement. It is evident, however, that dueling oppressions is not conducive to social change for all. The campaign gave Americans the chance to see the degradation caused by the constant challenges of gender, race and class showcased by the system of politics through the politically hegemonic American media. The election coverage in the media also showed what Patricia Hill Collins has already pointed out, that while many of us "have little difficulty identifying [our] own victimization within some

³⁸ See Joan Meyers-Levy & Brian Sternthal, *Gender Differences in the Use of Message Cues and Judgments*, 28 J. MARKETING RES. 84, 84 (1991). "Data from two experiments suggest that the genders differ in how they make judgments. In comparison with men, women appeared to have a lower threshold for elaborating on message cues and thus made greater use of such cues in judging products." *Id.*

³⁹ See FALK, *supra* note 11, at 54. A 1994 study of newspapers and news magazines found that "men were more likely to be described as 'leaders' than were women." *Id.*

major system of oppression—whether it be race, social class, religion, physical ability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age or gender, [we] typically fail to see how [our] thoughts and actions uphold someone else's subordination."⁴⁰ Oppression as difference, the embodiment of "the other," was ever present in the media representations of the 2008 presidential election. What the research showed is that the United States media are institutions ripe with reproductions, representations and stereotypes of gender, class and race oppression, among many others, that affect us all. While not all differences are rendered equal, the media headlined them all with gender as a clear distinction.

CONCLUSION

Media portrayals are particularly important in presidential elections. The press plays an integral role in the campaign by framing, shaping, ignoring or presenting the candidates to the public. Although media reports about a candidate vary and people draw upon very different experiences, ideas, or schemas to interpret them, consistencies and patterns can have important effects.

One of the most important potential effects of media coverage of campaigns may be their influence on political participation. Depending on the content, the media can encourage people to participate, engage, and become interested in or critical of the political process. For those students who were negative about the objectivity of the media, when asked how else they could garner information about the process or the candidates, each had no idea. When some attested to the fact that they would use the internet, they were reminded that the internet included mass media and, as such, was no less biased.

Others said they would get information from friends. When asked where their friends would get the information, they admitted friends would get it from the media. No one had alternate ideas for gathering information. Allowing for the fact that almost everything known about candidates is presented through the media, one must consider that a systematic media bias can have important social effects and most certainly form the schemas that affect subconscious opinions.

History appears to follow the media in their avoidance of the discussion of women. According to Falk, the absence of women in official and academic histories has resulted in the retardation of women's political

⁴⁰ PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, *BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT* 287 (2d ed. 2000).

advancement. The fewer the number of women known to have run for political office, the more it makes women appear novel and awkward in the political sphere.⁴¹ Only a couple of students knew Sarah Palin was not the first woman to have run for vice president of the United States. Few knew about Geraldine Ferraro. Fewer still knew about Shirley Chisholm, Carol Mosley Braun, Victoria Woodhull, Belva Lockwood, Margaret Chase Smith, Lenora Fulani, or even Pat Schroder or Elizabeth Dole. Everyone knew about Presidents such as Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Hoover, Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, Nixon, Eisenhower, Clinton and Bush, among others.

Most disturbing are the arguments against women candidates for office. Men and women alike said there is nothing beyond biological differences in terms of what men can do that women cannot and what women can do that men cannot. The majority, however, felt that the biological differences were substantial in terms of stability and capability. For instance, many felt the president should serve in the Armed Services, while many felt women should not. The traits most listed for a president were honesty, communication ability, believability, strength and intellect. Most men felt women were more honest, better communicators and more truthful. Men, however, did not feel women had the strength needed to run a war, or the intellect to “run” with the boys who will always be a part of the political system.

There also is a definite lack of knowledge about women candidates. While no one knew about Sarah Palin, most seemed to understand Clinton solely by what former President Bill Clinton did or did not do. Many who did not vote in the Clinton presidential elections formed opinions based on what their parents had said about President Clinton.

Parents and parental guidance frequently play a part in determining a candidate’s popularity for their children. Those who had been away from home longer, generally second-time voters, were more independent in their ideas about for whom to vote. It was especially noticeable that first time voters would say that their family politics were Republican, yet they went to great lengths to explain their ideas in terms of a liberal stance. It would appear that abortion played a major part in the decisions of these women voters. Many women who were not so enamored with Palin, valued her stance on abortion. When discussing democratic rights, each mentioned her Christian beliefs, especially in terms of “my family.”

⁴¹ See FALK, *supra* note 11, at 3 (pointing to lackluster press coverage of women’s campaigns and a lack of history on women’s campaigns as prohibitive of women’s political growth).

Political party also has a lot to do with the schemas that students have about a president. Many actually do not remember the last Democratic president, other than parental viewpoints. They have heard Republican for the last eight years, and while they may understand that life is not the epitome of the American Dream right now, they seem to know most about Republicans as the Grand Old Party and the party that represents the most presidents. When female candidates in other than national elections were mentioned, students had very little information about them.

The bottom line amounts to insufficient, unfavorable, stereotypical, or very little information about women as a hindrance to women in running for the presidency. If a woman is strong, she is compared to a man; if a woman is feminine, she is symbolically less intelligent. It is the media that overplays or underplays the information given about candidates. Media representations are generally depicted by male journalists. The media traditionally undermines what it means to be a woman living in a male-dominated society that is often at odds with the national success of women. The traditional interpretations of women and their roles in society are often misdirected. Many astute observers and researchers were unreliable interpreters of women because they could not analyze and evaluate them objectively. They could only interpret from their own white male system bias.⁴² It is important to see that the white male system is just that, a system. It is not reality. It is not the way the world is, but a constructed reality. Yet, a static system allows for no differences. A static system gives the illusion of safety. A static system ignores or disparages process in favor of content. A static system devalues and devours itself. Nothing is, but what is not.⁴³

The mass media seem to be understood by this study's interviewees as problematic. More than people's individual ideas of difference, this study's respondents perceived the media to be the culprit in specifying difference. Because the differences pointed out by the media are generally those of white men, most respondents in this study felt the media communicates in terms of what was, who still has the most power, and those who are different from the white male.

Those interviewed felt there is a difference between culture and gender

⁴² ANNE WILSON SCHAEF, *WOMEN'S REALITY: AN EMERGING FEMALE SYSTEM IN THE WHITE MALE SOCIETY* 33 (1981) (pointing to the "Old Boys" in the field of psychology, like Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson, who were able to gather data about women but were unable to accurately analyze it).

⁴³ *Id.* at 2, 169 (discussing the mistaken view of some that the White Male System is reality, rather than just a system, and that this inability to recognize reality perpetuates the White Male System and allows it to continue unchallenged).

that goes ignored. As one interviewee said, “[y]ou can learn to like Chinese food; you can’t learn to like women’s clothes.”⁴⁴ In other words, gender is a difference we can learn, but not necessarily “overcome.” “Therefore, gender continues to be a bone of contention because the differences appear to be the reality.” In a chicken and egg scenario, it’s a vicious circle. Because differences appear to be reality, they become reality; they become reality because they appear that way. Students felt that if we are to be one America, we need to accept difference as perception and perception not as fact. Interviewees were cautious about how to change things, however. It appears to them that as long as America remains competitive, the media, as well as people in general (perhaps through agenda setting), will continue to see things as difference, debate and competition.

Americans love freedom; the First Amendment is evidence to those things Americans do not want denied. While some interviewees felt the way these freedoms are provided is not always equal and generally it is the marginalized “few” who are the recipients of any imbalance, not one of the interviewees would take away any of the freedoms Americans have. Even as they understood that this might mean women and others could remain second-class citizens, none was in favor of giving up choice.

So what are women to do? Can there ever be true equality between men and women in politics? The female candidate still must cope with centuries old biases with perceptions that her image is wrong, that someone who looks like her was not made to lead a nation or to decide questions of national well-being or international security.⁴⁵ Her style of communication may be considered too female and what she wears or how her hair is styled is media fodder. Can women truly make progress when political strategies and tactics are still deemed “masculine” or “feminine”? If political campaigns are viewed as communication phenomena, the way women communicate, as different from men, may make the process slow. If political campaigns are viewed as communication phenomena and media are involved, the progress may be slower still; also, the two overlap. Men and women are viewed differently in all things, whether consciously or unconsciously. The strong, robust, authoritative, self-confident types generally win. These traits are usually masculine. Perhaps gender “flaws” are a creation of women; perhaps women will learn to become more

⁴⁴ Interview on file with authors.

⁴⁵ JUDITH S. TRENT & ROBERT V. FRIEDENBERG, *POLITICAL CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATION* 175 (6th ed. 2008) (stating that the woman candidate must take into account these considerations when communicating to the public).

patriarchal.

It is certain, however, that the 2008 presidential election provided a closer look at the obstacles women must face. As more and more women run for office, a clearer and better look at those obstacles might provide the needed answers. Politics for the people and by the people certainly includes women too.