

PRESIDENTIAL PIONEER OR CAMPAIGN QUEEN?

HILLARY CLINTON AND THE FIRST-TIMER/FRONTRUNNER DOUBLE BIND

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On September 20, 2015, Hillary Clinton appeared on CBS's *Face the Nation* to answer questions about her bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. She and host John Dickerson had the following exchange:

Dickerson: In politics this year, it looks like everybody wants an outsider.

Clinton: (laughter)

Dickerson: Now that puts you in a fix.

Clinton: Oh, I don't think—

Dickerson: —Does it put you in a fix? Tell us why it doesn't put you in a fix.

Clinton: I cannot imagine anyone being more of an outsider than the first woman president. I mean really, let's think about that.¹

Dickerson reacted with bemusement. Being the frontrunner in a major-party presidential nominating contest is not typically something that puts the candidate “in a fix.” Nor should it have been laughable that a woman candidate was trying to assume the mantle of outsider in a U.S. presidential campaign—plenty of male candidates with long lists of political bona fides have pulled that off.² Fourteen months after the interview, however, Clin-

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ton's presidential bid was quashed by self-proclaimed outsider Donald J. Trump in a supposed rebuke of the establishment order in both major U.S. political parties. Whether Trump qualifies as an "outsider" is a matter of some dispute,³ but the narrative that casts Trump as a trenchant iconoclast and Clinton as an interminable pol diverts attention from the ways in which women continue to be disadvantaged in presidential campaigns—particularly during a so-called "change election." As the first woman to be a presumptive major party presidential nominee in two separate campaign cycles, Clinton faced a set of constraints that have not hampered other prospective presidential nominees. Her presidential bids have revealed a(nother) double bind endemic to U.S. presidentiality: the first-timer/frontrunner double bind. My examination of this rhetorical dynamic reveals not only the persistent resistance to female presidentiality; it also explains why Clinton's political persona continues to be shaped by negative characterizations of female political power. After briefly reviewing academic research on gender double binds, I examine the ways in which Clinton has been cast as presidential pioneer or campaign queen—outgrowths of the first-timer/frontrunner double bind. This analysis demonstrates that although Barack Obama's election challenged the hegemonic whiteness of the U.S. presidency, its hegemonic masculinity remains firmly entrenched.

GENDER DOUBLE BINDS

The gender double bind, centuries old,⁴ has many manifestations,⁵ but undergirding each one is "a rhetorical construct that posits two and only two alternatives" that are "constructed to deny women access to power and, where individuals manage to slip past their constraints, to undermine their exercise of whatever power they achieve."⁶ The double bind that most forcefully has constrained women's political agency is the "femininity/competence" double bind, in which "women who are considered feminine will be judged incompetent, and women who are competent, unfeminine."⁷ The logic of the femininity/competence double bind undergirds the practice of decrying powerful women as "bitches," "ballbusters," or worse.⁸ Its impact on political women has been documented by scholars, as has women politicians' courageous and creative rhetorical resistance.⁹

Women who owe their jobs to the electorate are not all affected by the femininity/competence double bind in exactly the same way. Those seeking representative offices like seats in state legislatures or the U.S. Congress can subordinate themselves to their constituents, thereby sidestepping the leadership norms that most directly violate norms of femininity. Those seeking executive offices like state governorships must craft a leadership style that affords them credibility while still appealing to the majority of voters.¹⁰ Individual women politicians have been quite successful at challenging the hegemony of the femininity/competence double bind. The U.S. presidency, however, is the Catch-22's last outpost—fortified by the thorough masculinization of the office of U.S. president. When Hillary Clinton launched her first bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, she was bombarded with misogynistic attacks that were rooted in this double bind, and some scholars and pundits have faulted sexism for her failure to capitalize on her early lead in the 2008 Democratic primary.¹¹ Fortunately, however, Clinton's history-making second run at the Democratic presidential nomination affords a unique opportunity to examine the two bids in tandem. That perspective has revealed a new double bind, one that is unique to U.S. presidentiality and that only affects women: the first-timer/frontrunner double bind.

FIRST-TIMER/FRONTRUNNER DOUBLE BIND

PRESIDENTIAL PIONEER

When Clinton launched her campaign for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, it was widely—and incorrectly—hailed as a presidential “first.” Although women have been running for president since before they earned the right to vote in the United States,¹² the history of women's presidential aspirations has been recorded as a series of “firsts”: the first woman to appear on a ballot; the first woman to be a third-party nominee; the first woman of color to run for president; the first “serious” female presidential contender; the first woman to be included in televised presidential debates; the first woman to be a frontrunner in a major-party presidential primary; and the list goes on. The metaphor that most commonly is deployed in journalistic accounts of female presidential candidates is the “pioneer” metaphor. Although not an explicitly derogatory frame, the pioneer meta-

phor historically has presented women's presidential bids as symbolic rather than serious, occluding the progress that women have made in electoral politics and situating women as perpetual presidential novices.¹³

As presidential pioneers, women ought, at least, to benefit from their status as outsiders. As previously noted, the politically experienced and connected men who have run for president routinely (and sometimes laughably) attempt to claim outsider status. A politically viable presidential outsider, however, is someone who can convince the electorate that he or she is "outside" of party elites, or the Washington beltway, or politics altogether. Men who are political outsiders are still very much inside the gendered norms of presidentiality. If women with presidential aspirations attempt to capitalize on the outsider status conferred by their gender, they typically are dismissed as unqualified. Because the femininity/competence double bind lingers in the political ether, women must foreground their political qualifications and experience, ceding the advantages afforded men who may more easily be viewed as competent, credible outsiders.

During Hillary Clinton's first presidential campaign, the narrative constructed by journalists, pundits, and others was maddeningly paradoxical. On one hand, Clinton was framed as a presidential pioneer who lacked the right kind of political experience and whose candidacy appealed primarily to women. On the other hand, because Clinton was the early frontrunner in the 2008 Democratic primary, her persona also was constituted by terms that have long been associated with powerful women—most of them unfavorable.¹⁴ In the end, she lost the Democratic presidential nomination to Barack Obama, a younger and less experienced politician whose ethnicity challenged the hegemonic whiteness of the U.S. presidency but whose gender left its hegemonic masculinity intact.

Fast forward eight years. Hillary Clinton is, once again, the frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination. In the intervening years, she shored up the weaknesses in her political resume, gaining foreign policy experience as U.S. secretary of state and locking down the support of Democratic Party elites early in her bid. She also did what few other female candidates have been able to do: she raised money. Because political donors like to bet on a winner, they have been less inclined to donate to candidates whose bids are seen as largely symbolic. The frame becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy when women shut down their campaigns as a result of empty coffers. Determined to buck this trend, Clinton played by the rules of the

game, gaining the sorts of experience needed to be taken seriously and building political and economic capital—all of which produced the interview moment featured at the beginning of this essay: in the year of the outsider, the year that produced Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, frontrunner Hillary Clinton was “in a fix” because she was . . . winning. In part, that exchange can be attributed to the media’s need to keep a campaign exciting when the outcome seemed assured. It’s more than that, however; as in 2008, Clinton’s frontrunner status has been tainted by metaphors of entitlement and mania, and her popularity at the polls has been derided as antidemocratic.

CAMPAIGN QUEEN

It’s not surprising that in both 2008 and 2016, Clinton frequently was cast as a queen on the campaign trail. As the oldest incarnation of executive female rule, queens are a familiar archetype. When royal imagery is deployed in the context of an American election, however, it invokes both a sense of entitlement and an antidemocratic impulse. The political cartoon shown (see fig. 1) encapsulates both sentiments.

The nomination is cast as a coronation—something to which Clinton is entitled and for which she has not worked. Clinton taps her fingers, annoyed that she has to go through the motions of the primary process, while the donkey that stands in for the Democratic Party holds the crown aloft, unenthusiastic about Clinton’s seemingly unearned victory.¹⁵

The notion of the 2016 election being a Clinton coronation emerged early. In 2014, political cartoonist Jim Morin of the *Miami Herald* depicted her deliberation over whether to run as a contemplation about donning the royal mantle.¹⁶ In 2015, conservative talk show host Hugh Hewitt published *The Queen: The Epic Ambition of Hillary and the Coming of a Second “Clinton Era.”*¹⁷ Queenly imagery worked equally well when Clinton was ahead and when Sanders began to close in on her. Her momentum in the primaries garnered headlines like, “Hillary Clinton Won the Debate: Democrats’ Plan for a Coronation Is on Track”;¹⁸ “The Clinton Coronation Resumes”;¹⁹ and “Hillary Clinton Turns New York into a Coronation.”²⁰ As Sanders’s campaign picked up steam, editorial cartoonists fit that narrative into the coronation frame. A sketch by John Branch features an expectant



Fig. 1.

Clinton holding a crown aloft adorned with a donkey's head. A jubilant Bernie Sanders emerges from behind her head with his arms outstretched, separating the Democratic coronet from its presumed heir.²¹ The *New York Post* appealed to voters' democratic sensibilities by urging them to "Stop the Coronation!" on the front page of the May 11, 2016 edition of the newspaper, and other news outlets positioned the notion of a coronation in opposition to a competitive election with headlines like, "How Sanders Caught Fire in Iowa and Turned the Clinton Coronation into a Real Race";²² "Gays for Hillary: It's an Election, Not a Coronation";²³ and "Hillary Clinton Brought This on Herself: How a Democratic Primary Coronation Turned into a War."²⁴

Because the coronation metaphor is premised on unearned advantage, it was easy to turn monarchical imagery into a narrative of Clinton's ostensible political entitlement. This, too, emerged early. Writing for the *Weekly Standard* in 2014, Noemie Emery contended: "She feels entitled to make \$200,000 for a speech, to own two mega-houses in pricey neighborhoods, to be treated like royalty. . . . Now she feels entitled to go back to her old digs on Pennsylvania Avenue. . . not as first lady this time, but as the Big Dog

herself.”²⁵ Similarly, the *National Review* ran a piece describing “Hillary Clinton’s Entitlement Problem” in the summer of 2014.²⁶ Clinton’s early efforts to shore up support within the party—necessary work that any serious candidate would do—were castigated by the *New York Times*’s Mark Leibovich, who in an August 2015 appearance on *Face the Nation* pilloried Clinton’s advance planning by asserting that her efforts to secure the support of Democratic superdelegates was a sign of her ostensible entitlement. Leibovich asserted, “nothing screams entitled inevitability, looking way far ahead, than talk about superdelegates at this early stage.”²⁷ Once the primary campaign began in earnest, although she led Sanders by votes, delegates, and superdelegates, the media was eager to portray that lead as bestowed rather than earned. Headlines promoting Clinton’s strength as entitlement emerged from right- and left-leaning sources. The *National Interest* castigated “Hillary Clinton’s Wild Sense of Entitlement”;²⁸ Fox News ran a piece entitled “Understanding Hillary’s Entitlement”;²⁹ the left-leaning blog *U.S. Uncut* announced that “Hillary Clinton Is Not Entitled to the Votes of Bernie Sanders Supporters”;³⁰ and *Aljazeera America* ran a piece entitled “Hillary Clinton Is Not Entitled to Black Votes.”³¹

Interestingly, while pundits were focused on Hillary’s ostensible sense of entitlement, Sanders actually voiced his own. On May 1, 2016 he asserted, “If I win a state with 70 percent of the vote, you know what? I think I am entitled to those superdelegates.”³² In a story covering that statement, the *New York Times* reported, “Bernie Sanders said on Sunday that he and Hillary Clinton were heading to a ‘contested’ convention this summer because she will need superdelegates to secure the nomination, a claim that clashes with the accepted definition of a contested convention. He also said that superdelegates who have supported her should switch to him instead.”³³

As Sanders was stumping for 11th-hour rules changes, pundits promoted a media narrative of Clinton as antidemocratic. An op-ed for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* demonstrates the ways in which the theme of monarchical entitlement infused the notion of Clinton as antidemocratic: “Hillary Clinton is a huge fan of democracy—just so long as it doesn’t get in her way. HRC—Her Royal Clintonness—has not driven a car in two decades. Her list of speaking-engagement demands includes special pillows onstage and hummus and crudites offstage (crudites is a fancy word for veggies).”³⁴ In May of 2016, Ralph Nader, the Bernie Sanders of the 2000

campaign, acknowledged Clinton's lead but declared that she was poised to "win by dictatorship."³⁵

As dictator-queen, Clinton was characterized by pathological ambition—ambition that could destroy not only her own campaign but her party as well.³⁶ Political scholar Timothy Lynch published a column in the *Age* with the following headline and subheadline: "Hillary Clinton's Hunger for Power Could Unravel Her Campaign: Hillary Clinton Is One of the Most Ruthless Politicians, but Her Fierce Ambition Could Unravel Her Campaign for the Top Job."³⁷ The article is accompanied by drawing of Clinton as a giant whose visage looms large over Washington. The Sanders campaign recognized the strategic value in promoting this narrative. Appearing on CNN, Sanders's campaign manager, Jeff Weaver, urged, "don't destroy the Democratic Party to satisfy the secretary's ambitions to become president of the United States."³⁸

The narrative of Clinton's undemocratic sense of entitlement and pathological personal ambition underscores the continued resilience of the femininity/competence double bind. Whereas male presidential candidates are expected to be ambitious—the so-called "fire in the belly" is typically a prerequisite for presidential candidates rather than a disqualifier—Clinton's ambition was deemed dangerous. This theme did not only emerge at the end of the primary campaign when Clinton was feeling pressure from Sanders. It was in place before she officially launched her campaign. Take, for example, *GQ's* 2014 interview with Glenn Greenwald, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who broke the Edward Snowden story. The piece makes clear his antipathy for Clinton, but his rant is illustrative here because of the way in which the themes of monarchical entitlement and pathological ambition coalesce:

But she's going to be the first female president, and women in America are going to be completely invested in her candidacy. Opposition to her is going to be depicted as misogynistic, like opposition to Obama has been depicted as racist. It's going to be this *completely symbolic messaging that's going to overshadow the fact that she'll do nothing but continue everything in pursuit of her own power. . . . Americans love to mock the idea of monarchy, and yet we have our own de facto monarchy* [emphasis added].³⁹

Clinton's ambition also was satirized in a 2015 *Saturday Night Live* sketch in which she is preparing the YouTube announcement that officially an-

nounced her candidacy.⁴⁰ Unlike *SNL*'s popular debate sketches, which typically satirize past debate performances, this bit preceded Clinton's actual announcement. Its parodic predictions function as a distillation of cultural stereotypes about Clinton, specifically, and female power, more broadly. The sketch is set in Clinton's home office in her Chappaqua, New York residence and features Clinton (Kate McKinnon) and her aide (Vanessa Bayer) preparing her digital announcement speech. Clinton initially feigns nervousness at the prospect of announcing her candidacy, rubbing her desk and remarking, "Oh my gosh, I don't know if I have it in me. I'm scared." Without pausing, Clinton snaps to attention and confidently asserts, "I'm kidding! Let's do this." The aide explains that Clinton will be filming her announcement on her personal cell phone, to make it seem more "personal and intimate." Before recording, Clinton begins with vocal warm-ups that suggest disjunction between her public persona and an authentic self shaped by ambition and entitlement:

Hillary's a granny with a twinkle in her eye;
 Hillary's a granny and she makes an apple pie;
 First female president. First female president;
 Me me me me me me me.

The aide instructs Clinton to hold up her phone and look natural. Clinton leans in so that her face fills the entire phone screen. With eyes bulging she shouts, "Citizens! You will elect me! I will be your leader!"

Although Clinton secured the Democratic presidential nomination, the damage done by the first-timer/frontrunner double bind did, indeed, put Clinton "in a fix," and the narrative of pathological ambition reinforced the other gender double binds women candidates have been working decades to displace. As Clinton pivoted to the general election, she faced opposition suffused with the same gendered slurs that have been hurled at her since the beginning of her public career. The *Washington Post*'s Jenna Johnson observed that although Trump referred to Clinton as "Crooked Hillary," many of his supporters "have chosen a different nickname for her—one starting with a 'b' and rhyming with 'witch.'" The word is often shouted from the audience as Trump attacks her, murmured in pre-rally conversations and typed on Twitter. It appears on a popular button sold by vendors at many rallies: 'Life's a b—, don't vote for one.' And, most prominently, it is

on those white T-shirts, created by the Ohio-based Street Talk sold at nearly all of Trump's rallies."⁴¹ The T-shirt to which Johnson refers has the slogan "Trump that Bitch" written in big, bold letters.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of the first-timer/frontrunner double bind underscores that although Barack Obama's election challenged the hegemonic whiteness of the U.S. presidency, its hegemonic masculinity remains firmly entrenched. Male "first-timers," like Obama in 2008 and Trump in 2016, often are viewed favorably as outsiders and credible leaders. Conversely, female "first-timers" historically have been viewed as pioneers with symbolic appeal rather than political strength. To be taken seriously as presidential candidates, women politicians must amass significant political experience, party support, and campaign funds. Once they do that, their political strength is portrayed as antidemocratic entitlement and their presidential aspirations as a manic desire for power. Analysis of this rhetorical dynamic reveals the constraints with which future female presidential candidates—both first-timers and frontrunners—will have to contend.

NOTES

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2. For example, in 2000, George W. Bush, son of a former U.S. president, cast himself as a regular guy from Texas who was not enmeshed in Washington political culture. In 2008, Senator John McCain was branded a "maverick" despite serving more than two decades in the U.S. Senate. In 2016, Senator Bernie Sanders was widely hailed as an outsider despite his 26-year career in Congress.
3. E. J. Dionne Jr., "Donald Trump Is a Phony Outsider," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/donald-trump-is-a-phony-outsider/2016/11/02/75a9b1ac-a12b-11e6-a44d-cc2898cfab06_story.html?utm_term=.bb6445f2afc7; and George Monbiot, "Donald Trump Is No Outsider: He Mirrors Our Political Culture," *Guardian*, October 26, 2016, opinion sec., <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/26/donald-trump-outsider-system-elections>.

4. In her book, Jamieson documents one example from 1631. See Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.
5. Rebecca M. L. Curnalia and Dorian L. Mermer summarize the five double binds outlined by Jamieson as follows: “Women are complimented more on their bodies than brains; women have the choice to speak out and be shamed or be silent and invisible; women are subordinated, whether they define themselves as similar to or different from men; femininity is perceived as incompetence, and competence is unfeminine; and aging women are seen as less relevant and valuable, whereas aging men are seen as distinguished.” See Rebecca M. L. Curnalia and Dorian L. Mermer, “The ‘Ice Queen’ Melted and It Won Her the Primary: Evidence of Gender Stereotypes and the Double Bind in News Frames of Hillary Clinton’s ‘Emotional Moment,’” *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* 15 (January 2014): 27.
6. Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind*, 14.
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8. Karrin Vasby Anderson, “‘Rhymes with Blunt’: Pornification and US Political Culture,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 327–68; Karrin Vasby Anderson, “‘Rhymes with Rich’: ‘Bitch’ as a Tool of Containment in Contemporary American Politics,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 2 (1999): 599–623, doi:10.1353/rap.2010.0082; and C. Robert Whaley and George Antonelli, “The Birds and the Beasts: Women as Animal,” *Maledicta* 7: 219–29, <https://habricentral.org/resources/46766>.
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10. Popular women governors such as former Texas Governor Ann Richards or former New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman forged public personae that grew out

- of the unique political and cultural environments of their respective states, using place-based rhetoric to stymie the dynamic of the double bind. See Anderson and Sheeler, *Governing Codes*.
11. See, for example, Sheeler and Anderson, *Woman President*; Erika Falk, "Clinton and the Playing-the-Gender-Card Metaphor in Campaign News," *Feminist Media Studies* 13 (2013): 192–207; Carlin and Winfrey, "Have You Come a Long Way, Baby?"; and Rebecca Traister, "In Iowa, Hillary Shows She's Learned Something About Running While Female," *Cut*, February 2, 2016, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/02/what-hillary-learned-about-running-while-female.html>.
 12. Victoria Woodhull was the first woman to run officially for the U.S. presidency, representing the Equal Rights Party in 1872.
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 14. Sheeler and Anderson, *Woman President*; and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *Hillary Clinton in the News: Gender and Authenticity in American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).
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