

CAMPAIGNING ★ ★ ★ WHILE ★ ★ ★ FEMALE

HOW WOMEN CANDIDATES ARE RESHAPING PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS

BY KELLY DITTMAR

66 "I'M NOT RUNNING AS A WOMAN CANDIDATE," Hillary Clinton told audiences during her 2008 Democratic presidential campaign. "I'm running because I think I'm the best candidate to hit the ground running." Downplaying her gender was a choice. Her chief strategist, Mark Penn, had advised against embracing it as an electoral asset, arguing in an early campaign memo that voters were not ready for a "first mama." By his calculation, she needed to prove she was "man enough" to be commander in chief.

The danger of displaying stereotypically feminine traits continued to concern Penn. After the January 2013 congressional hearings on Benghazi, he emailed then-Secretary of State Clinton: "I don't think the emotion in the hearing works to your advantage." But her staffers roundly dismissed Penn's characterization, with Deputy Secretary Jake Sullivan asserting, "My problem with Mark's analysis is that it repeats the same flawed assumption that underpinned his 2008 advice; namely, that being yourself is risky."

Clinton's 2016 campaign also rejects Penn's flawed assumption. "I'm not asking people to vote for me simply because I'm a woman," she assures voters. "I'm asking people to vote for me on the merits." And now she adds, "I think one of the merits is I am a woman."

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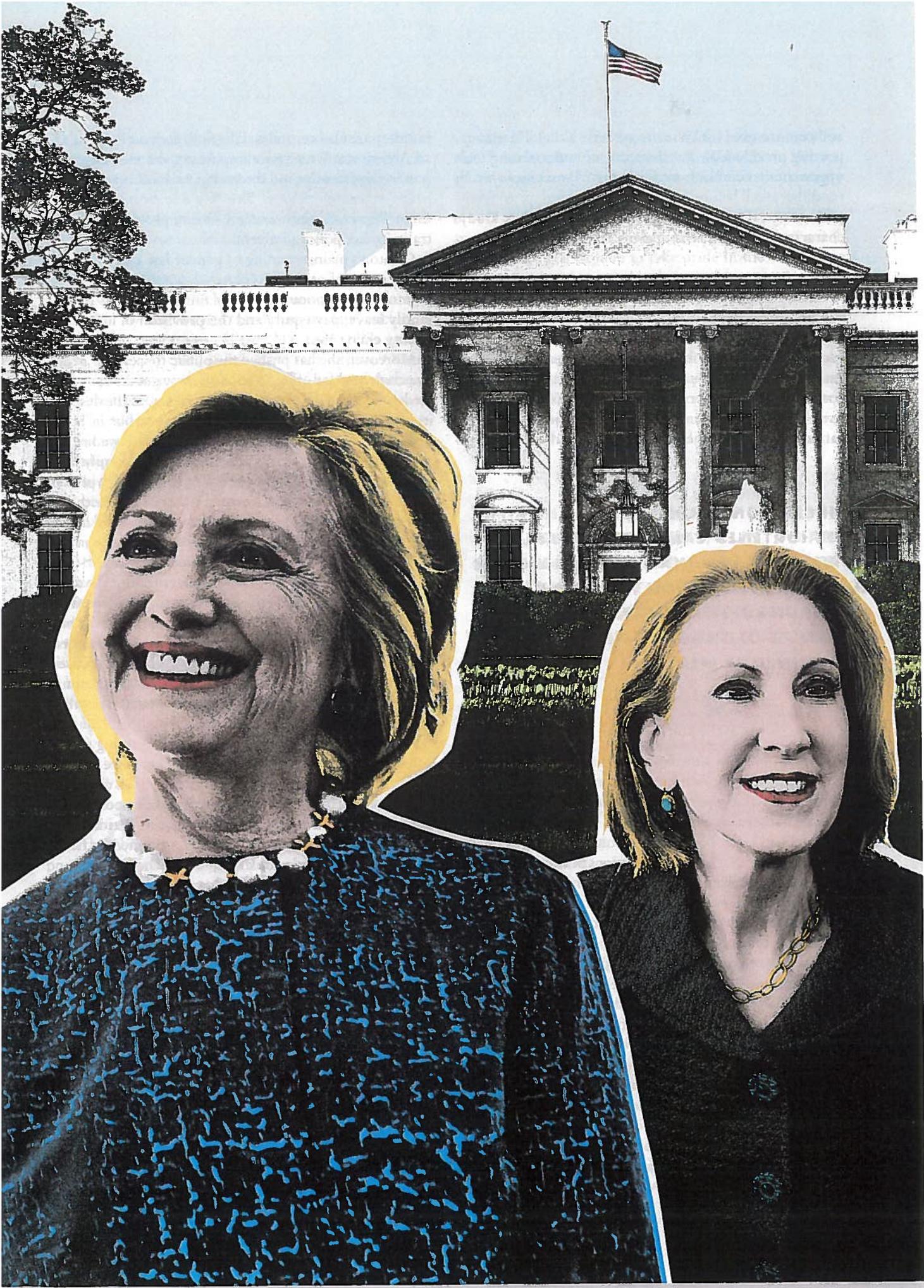
been determined by men. The degree of that disruption has been tempered, however, by each candidate's personal priorities and party affiliation, as well as the political latitude granted by her standing in the polls.

"MANNING UP" TO THE JOB

When *Washington Post* columnist Dana Milbank described Clinton's performance in the first Democratic debate of the 2016 race, he called her a "man among boys," demonstrating the persistent bias in presidential politics that favors the most masculine candidates. In fact, male candidates have always brandished their manliness, posing with wives and children to emphasize their role as paternal protectors, having photographers capture them throwing a football or shooting a gun.

Women candidates have also recognized the political power of masculinity. In 2008, Clinton focused on earning her manly credentials, leading one of her supporters, Paul Gipson, president of a steelworkers' local, to praise her "testicular fortitude." Even in the 2016 campaign, one of her first web videos celebrated her refusal to back down from a fight. The five-minute video portrayed Clinton's determination in tackling tough issues like health care and civil rights. Fiorina similarly touted her success in taking on adversaries, whether in the boardroom or on the debate stage. If elected, she promised, she'd build "the strongest military on the face of the planet."

These masculine demands conflict with the feminine traits expected of women, such as emotion, compassion



and compromise, which many perceive as liabilities to appearing presidential. But the tactic of undermining male opponents as feminine, or “girly men,” was employed by candidates well before women became serious presidential contenders, a reminder that male privilege has always characterized political campaigns.

DISRUPTION DYNAMICS

As more women have won elected office, our collective image of who can and should lead has been altered, and the qualifications deemed advantageous to candidates have expanded. Until now, however, the dearth of women among competitive presidential contenders has limited our understanding of how this might play out at the highest level. With women competing for both major-party nominations for the first time ever—until Fiorina’s withdrawal—

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the 2016 primary season has demonstrated how women’s presence can alter the rules of the game.

Amid the usual lineup of dark suits and red and blue ties, Clinton and Fiorina have stood out on debate stages and on the campaign trail, defying expectations of what a presidential candidate looks like. Beyond changing the picture of leadership, they found different ways to change the debate. Clinton does this by mainstreaming gender, giving women’s and men’s concerns equal influence in her campaign. In multiple speeches, she has challenged the sidelining of “women’s issues” and questioned their very definition.

She told a New Hampshire audience, “Child care is a women’s issue, but it’s also an economic issue. Paid family leave is a women’s issue, but it’s also an economic issue. You should not have to lose your paycheck or your job when you have a baby or someone in your family gets sick. Of course, equal pay is a women’s issue, but it’s also an economic issue. We have to just get over this. Women should be paid the same as men, and when they’re not... whole families get shortchanged.”

Of course, these issues have distinct effects on women,

but they are also central to Clinton’s economic agenda for all Americans. Even more important, she raises the same points consistently—on the stump, in debates and in campaign communications. She has not simply discussed them when talking to women; she emphasizes their centrality to her policy platform.

Clinton’s mainstreaming of gender has also influenced the agendas of other candidates. She forced each of her Democratic opponents to explain his position on paid family leave, pay equity and the provision of affordable, quality child care.

Moreover, she has pushed the public to view her gender as a credential for office in the same way gender serves as a credential for men. The “merit” of gender, as she describes it, is not rooted in biological determinism but in how it shapes our lived realities and the perspectives we bring to policymaking. In discussing the need for paid family leave, Clinton has shared her experience of being both a primary caretaker and a working woman. Contrast this with how Barack Obama positioned himself in the paid-leave debate: He told of watching his wife balance parenting with professional work while he pursued his political career.

Clinton is leapfrogging Penn’s concern about the country’s readiness for a “first mama” by touting the benefits of a “first grandma” in the Oval Office. “For me, it’s about my granddaughter and my next grandchild next summer,” she said in Iowa. “I want to make it possible for every child, not just my granddaughter, to have the opportunity to live up to his or her God-given potential. That will be my mission.”

Some would view Clinton’s tactics as disrupting gender expectations; Fiorina criticized them as evidence that she is “playing the gender card.” The Republican candidate walked a tightrope of her own, denying the importance of her gender yet using it to her advantage. She derided campaigns that employ “identity politics,” defined by her as running “on what you look like,” not “who you are, and what you believe and what you’ve done.” What Fiorina missed in this critique is that gender is reflected not only in what you look like, but also in who you are, what you believe and what you’ve done.

Fiorina nevertheless described how being a woman informed her bid for office. In videos, written commentary, debates and on the campaign trail, she pointed to her ability to overcome sexism in corporate America as proof of the perspective and self-determination she would bring as president.

“I started as a secretary,” Fiorina constantly reminded audiences in her stump speech. “I fought my way to the top of corporate America while being called every b-word in the book. I fought my way into this election... I’ve been told ‘no’ all my life. And all my life, I’ve refused to accept no as an answer.”

Even as she criticized feminism for excluding conservative women, she accepted how the layered identities of gender and party affiliation influenced her political outlook and agenda. But her campaign's most disruptive aspect may have been that it was so unlike Clinton's, thus refuting the idea that there is any one model of "running as a woman."

CONSTRAINTS ON CHANGE

Hillary Clinton entered the 2016 race with advantages unmatched by any woman candidate to date, including herself eight years ago. Given her two terms in the Senate, the experience of her 2008 race against Obama and her years as secretary of state, she'd earned the masculine credentials expected of executives.

In a late 2015 poll from *The Economist/You Gov*, 54 percent of those surveyed, including Democrats, Republicans and Independents, felt Clinton was ready to be commander in chief, besting any other candidate in the poll by nearly 20 points. In the same poll, 55 percent of respondents viewed her as tough enough to be president, a percentage matched by only one other candidate: Donald Trump.

With masculine credentials in hand, Clinton can emphasize her alternative credentials and put forth priorities consistent with the policy work that has dominated much of her professional life: gender equality and women's empowerment. And "being yourself" has been less risky for Clinton because of her position as front-runner; she started her candidacy with 51 percent favorability and nearly universal name recognition. Plus, her priorities are aligned with the platform of the Democratic Party. She doesn't need to push her party to consider such issues as paid family leave; the party already embraces them.

But Clinton still faces hurdles related to her gender. Like women who've run before her, she's the target of explicit sexism, such as Trump's assertion on ABC's *This Week* that she doesn't have the "strength or stamina" to be president. Clinton also confronts the age-old puzzle of needing to prove her strength without being characterized as unfeminine or unlikable.

"As a woman in a high public position or seeking the presidency, as I am," she said in an interview for Lifetime, "you have to be aware of how people will judge you for being, quote, emotional. It's a really delicate balancing act."

Calling out sexism or double standards, as Clinton has, remains risky; opponents and pundits have accused her of playing "the victim card." In addressing Trump's vulgar comments about debate bathroom breaks, her campaign chose an indirect response. The communications director tweeted, "We are not responding to Trump but everyone who understands the humiliation this degrading language inflicts on all women should."

Fiorina used a similar approach when Trump mocked her attractiveness in a *Rolling Stone* interview. "Look at

that face," he told the reporter. "Would anyone vote for that?" Addressing his comment in a subsequent debate, Fiorina said curtly, "I think women all over this country heard very clearly what Mr. Trump said." She left it to others to energize supporters against his misogyny. The super PAC CARLY for America released "Faces," a web video that urged women to take pride in the experience their face represents—and it went viral.

Fundamentally different outlooks have influenced the extent to which Clinton can—or Fiorina even sought to—upset campaign gender dynamics. Fiorina's derisive comments on identity politics limited her ability to invoke gender in her campaign without appearing hypocritical. While Clinton's commitment to gender equality is central to her politics and—arguably—to her ambition, Fiorina has described her success as earned *despite* her gender.

AMID THE USUAL LINEUP OF DARK SUITS AND RED AND BLUE TIES, CLINTON AND FIORINA HAVE STOOD OUT ON DEBATE STAGES AND ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL, DEFYING EXPECTATIONS OF WHAT A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE LOOKS LIKE.



Fiorina's constraints weren't only self-imposed. The Republican Party's stated aversion to identity politics kept her from making the case that gender diversity matters. And while running as an underdog can offer its own strategic opportunity, being a newcomer on the national stage meant Fiorina was still expected to prove herself capable of meeting the most significant standards for election, which remain rooted in masculinity.

Disrupting the dynamics of presidential politics doesn't mean neutralizing gender, a goal that is, at the very least, unrealistic. Gender shapes the experience and behavior of each candidate and, like any identity, brings variety and richness to the race. In this respect, every candidate plays a gender card, women and men alike. It is realistic to aim for greater diversity in candidates and campaign strategies—a goal that's essential to voters' continued trust in the system. But until every candidate can play all their cards, we'll know the deck is still stacked against women. ■

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