

Article: “Seeing What Has Always Been”: Opening Study of the Presidency

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“Seeing What Has Always Been”: Opening Study of the Presidency

The 2008 presidential election has been widely touted as historic because a woman and an African American became viable candidates for a major party, thereby thrusting gender and race into the spotlight. Of course, gender and race have always been present as informal criteria for U.S. presidential candidates. At the constitutional founding, only white propertied men with sufficient affluence to be gentlemen of leisure were deemed suitable for national office (Wood 1991). Following the traditions of kings and military leaders, the executive was assumed to be an elite man and the institution itself became associated with men and fashioned in the preferences of its founders (March and Olsen 1989). For the presidency, founding fathers sought a heroic man, capable of leading in the extra-legal realm that they recognized could not be fully anticipated in law (Kann 1998). Since then, presidential campaigns have always been about what kind of man should hold an office predicated upon masculinity.

While certainly presidential candidates' characters have been most discussed, the quality of each candidate's masculinity has been embedded in the sizing up of presidential timber, character, and the person.

Largely these questions about masculinity remain outside of conscious awareness, even though they often are right in front of us. During the election of 2004, adequate or desirable masculinity became integral to the campaign as Republicans systematically sought to “Frenchify” or feminize John Kerry (Duerst-Lahti 2006). Attention to windsurfing and duck hunting, stock-car racing, and the guy you'd want a beer with was attention to masculinity. Perhaps less central to campaign strategy during the 2000 election, the campaign nonetheless evoked the two major modes of U.S. masculinity, dominance masculinity and technical expertise masculinity (Connell 1995). Overall, a study of news accounts found twice as many mentions of dominance masculinity than technical expertise masculinity, suggesting the importance of dominance to winning presidential elections. A good proportion of these mentions were dedicated to Gore's shortcomings in projecting alpha-male dominance (Duerst-Lahti 2006). This embedded masculinity presents challenges for women to become candidates and to attain viability.

In contrast, as Sinclair-Chapman and Price in this volume demonstrate, race is simultaneously

visible and invisible; front and center as a crucial political division and yet cued by other references that are blatantly obvious to the black community but not necessarily to whites. Race generally comes into mainstream (white) awareness only when a nonwhite candidate has entered the two-party fray. Except for the 1992 election, a candidate of color has entered the primaries for at least one of the major parties every cycle since 1980. Yet until Barak Obama, no non-white candidate achieved viability, in large part because too few believed a person of color could win in a racist culture.¹ The unspoken and sometimes non-conscious assumption has been that to win, a candidate must be white.

Rendered largely invisible until the late twentieth century, the raced and sexed control of political and social power and institutions by white men has rested upon naturalized hegemonic gender and race ideologies that make disparate and denigrating treatment seem ordinary and acceptable to those with entrenched power advantages (Hawkesworth 2003). Feminism and masculinism,² proto-ideologies for gender, have been integral throughout, as have various race ideologies (Dawson 2001). Given the success of hegemonic ideologies—gender, race, and the usual foundational ideologies underpinning the U.S. political system—relatively few Americans have questioned the fiction that anyone could grow up to be president. Those who do recognize this as myth may continue to work toward this signifier of genuine equality, but if they participate, they choose either to “throw away their vote” by voting for a candidate unlikely to win or rationally cast their lot with the best white male candidate for them. Such choices depend upon perception, and perception derives from individual belief systems and lived experience, which in turn are constituted by physical characteristics, group identifications, and the like. The world looks—and is experienced differently—if one is black, Latino, or white; female or male. These informal criteria for presidential candidates have held firm despite a growing number of presidential candidates who were either not white or not male.

Indisputably, historic candidates such as Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton grew out of gender and race transformations in social and political power and belief systems that hold them in place (Walby 1997). These changes also reflect and interact with longstanding battles for universal and genuine enfranchisement of voters. Because political parties must respect the importance of all voters, women, blacks,

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and Latinos have gained clout since 1984 when the newly recognized gender gap helped propel the selection of Geraldine Ferraro as Walter Mondale's running mate and Jessie Jackson's Rainbow Coalition emerged. Latino voters gained stature beginning in 1988. Since then, parties and campaigns have increasingly sliced voters into segments that recognize individual physical, cultural, and economic demographic characteristics as well as particular life experiences such as being a veteran. Said another way, citizens' relationships to the 2008 election is determined by their individuality and political locations vis-à-vis presidential politics. This trend to recognize mutually constitutive political categories of individual voters in order to target them effectively has magnified and solidified in 2008.

For the study of presidency, arguably this election's most enduring bequest will be its capacity to illuminate what has always been: the presidency and its selection processes as deeply raced and gendered. Precisely because Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Bill Richardson became viable, we can now readily see how white and male the informal criteria for office have been. Similarly, attention to this cycle's racialized and gendered voting patterns illuminates past disregard for particular segments of the voting population. Black women became *the* pivotal voters in South Carolina and in key states thereafter. Latino/a voters became the prize in California and Texas and arguably hold the pivotal political location in the 2008 general election. Older white women persisted as Clinton's base, in part because of their experience with sexism, which they witnessed her facing, and their strong desire to see a woman as president before they die. As a counterpoint, Republicans fielded a slate of what has previously prevailed for the presidency, and they fight to hold onto the historical gender-race norm even though, as Patricia Sykes shows us, the historical time of institutional development is clashing with the politics of this moment. The general election presents a generational contest, as well as a clash of the political moment and sticky historical institution evolution.

This symposium looks at gender and race in the 2008 presidential election to see better what has always been and to mark the transformations underway. It deploys approaches and concepts honed through critical race and feminist theories and empirical studies of gender, race, and ethnicity. Through the foil of the 2008 presidential election, it endeavors to open the discipline to the centrality of gender and race to all political phenomena, as well as to illuminate dynamics of this election.

Presidential Elections: Embedded, Embodied, in a Context

Presidential elections do not exist in a vacuum but grow out of historical practices, social and political power structures, belief systems, and a particular time and space in history. In many regards, presidential elections also involve early stages of political leadership processes, in which candidates seek followers in particular contexts. While *actual* leadership of presidential duties comes later, elections are about building a large enough base of followers to win and then govern. The institutionalized embeddedness of this leadership dynamic involves efforts to persuade peers, party gatekeepers, and other elites to support them, including securing endorsements and tapping top campaign professionals; eliciting positive coverage from news and other media entities; raising sufficient funds and resources from elites and citizens; and persuading enough citizens to participate on their behalfs in an array of electoral processes that culminate in voter turnout. The candidates persuade peers, professional intermediaries, and citizens to follow them. All of these activities build critical relationships between the candidates and followers and constitute the early stages of presidential leadership.

All leadership, including public leadership, must attend to elements that bear upon the essential aspects of relationships between leaders and followers, the processes of leadership tasks, and the particular context within which leadership occurs. In essence, the power (dis)advantages of persons in particular bodies (white men, Native American women) play out precisely because every person embodies political categories and is embedded in power structures. In short, power relations play out through individuals and their bodies, which are located within social and political institutional arrangements and cultural meaning. Human differences matters for the interactions and relationships between the leaders and followers, persons who embody categories (everybody), and the power structures in which categories are constituted, have meaning, and leadership is exercised. As articles in this volume demonstrate—because of their physical bodies, social expectations and “knowledge” about people with particular bodies, and the lived experience known about each candidate—Hillary Clinton needed to be seen as tough enough in order to pass muster as commander in chief yet likable enough as a woman; Barack Obama faces a paucity of experience with black men who lead outside of the black community and white fear of angry black men; Bill Richardson did not need to stage a *simpat-ico* understanding of Latino culture although his white skin and Anglo name hampered his Latino credentials; and John McCain need not prove his command potential and as a white man can draw upon historical institutionalism to his advantage. Articles also demonstrate the perspectives common to voters drawn from the intersections of gender-race demographics.

Every officeholder attempts to exert some leadership within an institution. In that post, the leader must deal with other persons of similar formal status, but who differ in their personal, social, and institutional power bases. As Mary Hawkesworth details in her riveting account of black congresswomen's marginalization as “equals” during welfare reform, the categories one embodies can matter greatly for the leadership possible within an institution (Hawkesworth 2003; 2006). Being different from most in an institutional environment, especially from those who wield institutional power, causes challenges for leadership. Much the same is true with leadership interactions across political institutions and with other gatekeepers and intermediaries who regulate entrance into leadership ranks (Duerst-Lahti 2005). The leadership environment extends to the mass level as well, where, for example, being the black president of majority white voters raises potential leadership dilemmas. The citizenry and voters themselves are persons who embody political categories and have experiences that shape perception of leaders, because they bring what they “know” to the relationship. Normative power comes into play through categorical knowledge (stereotypes) about types of people or upon knowledge about (liking or not) a particular leader. Throughout the tiers of embedding, embodied individuals also can observe their prospects as leaders or followers given their own experiences and knowledge of others like them.

It is within this embedded and embodied environment of tiered power that the presidential election takes place. In order to produce accurate and complete knowledge, the categories themselves must be examined and the consequences of various layers of embeddedness must be considered. Several levels of analysis are needed. And as always, to interpret and explain power structures, dynamics, and relationships must be central.

To Open the Study Presidential Elections: Person, Position, and Political Location

Adding the intersectionality paradigm to presidential elections represents an important step in opening and improving their study (Hancock 2007). Intersectionality is a way of describing

the interaction between systems of oppression and/or domination. The concept grew out of efforts to specify how race and gender relations shaped social and political life. In particular, it grew out of the writing of black feminists who argued that the current thinking about the interaction of race and gender systems was unsatisfactory since it tended to obscure those problems uniquely faced by black women. Today, scholars use the concept of intersectionality to theorize and research a wide variety of social groups and contexts, including questions of sexuality, class, religion, ethnicity, and region in a variety of contexts from the United States to Europe to Latin America and Africa, and in local and international contexts.³

In an attempt to weave elements of intersectionality paradigm with the study of presidential elections, I suggest a framework that accords with the public sector leadership environment. It focuses on **persons** involved as leaders and followers (candidates and supporters), the **position** and elements of its institutional domain (presidency, its election processes, media, parties, voters, etc.), and the **political location** of the leadership context as it is situated in space and time. These three domains create a “topography of intersection” (Garcia Bedolla 2007, 248) for public sector leadership. It also accords well with the multi-method and interpretive approach of a well-chosen organizational case that enables investigation of the complexity of oppression (Hawkesworth 2006). Employing an intersectionality(-plus) approach to leadership fits readily with some aspects of historical institutionalism and the demand that research call into question the neutrality of institutions, interrogate the norms of public institutions that have been rooted in masculinism and whiteness, and explore the power relations in play (Duerst-Lahti 2002a; Chappell 2006; Weldon 2006; Junn 2007).

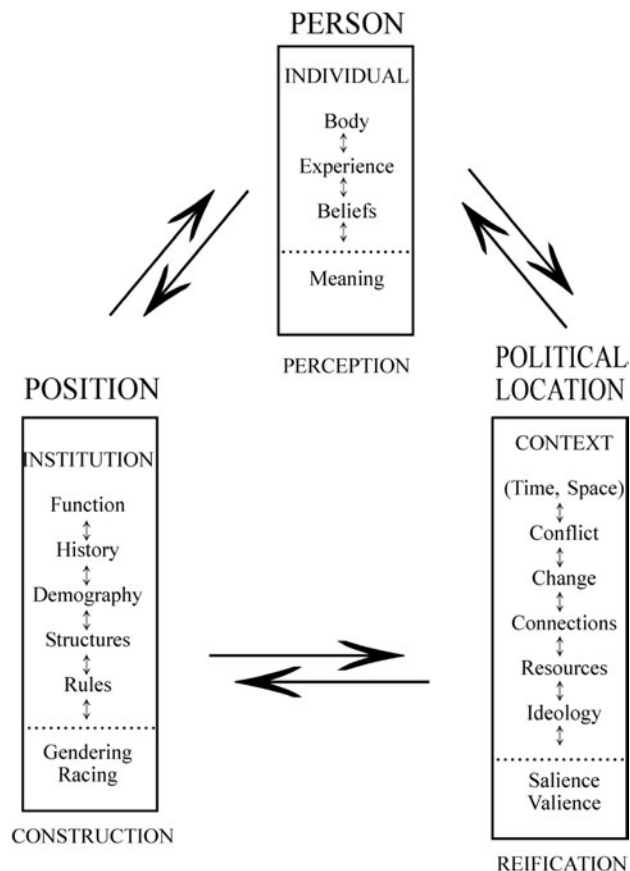
While doubtful that any one study can attend to all of these features, as this symposium shows, even with limited space, elements can be explored simultaneously and each study can remain vigilant about its own assumptions and its location within the mutually constitutive elements of an intersectional political environment. Accurate knowledge demands all domains receive at least some attention. Certainly also, research can be undertaken with sufficient authenticity, fittingness, auditability, objective confirmability, and applicability so as to satisfy the evaluative criteria of epistemic communities for high quality empirical research (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006, 94–6). Figure 1 provides a heuristic to explore aspects of political leadership important to presidential elections through the intersectionality paradigm.

Although the domains of person, position, and political location accord generally with the common political science units of analysis—individual, institution, and context—the epistemic roots make them quite distinct in orientation. The former derives from critical theory, feminist theory, and critical race theory while the latter draws from positivism and behavioralism. As a result, the object of the gaze—the unit of analysis—may be the same human being(s), part of government, and/or situational aspects surrounding them, but starting assumptions differ greatly in terms of approach to categories, assumptions of equal human agency, and neutral institutions.

Person: Body, Experience, Perception

Within the proposed framework, it is assumed that a person inhabits a body and that the characteristics of that body matter for what each person knows and how that person relates to other aspects of public sector leadership, and the converse (Jagar and Bordo 1989; Butler 1993). It also presupposes that despite overlaps in bodily characteristics, those characteristics cannot guarantee either the same experiences or the same interpretation of them. Instead the lived body and lived experience

Figure 1
Intersectionality Paradigm Applied to the Mutually Constitutive Public Sector Leadership Environment of Presidential Elections



become critically important.⁴ This vantage point provides a means to understand the subjectivity surrounding public sector leadership situated in presidential elections from various personal and political locations: conservatives viewing John McCain or Hillary Clinton, the courting of Latino/a voters, Hillary Clinton constructed and perceived by polls, and black compared to whites as they react and interpret Barak Obama. Of course an individual’s beliefs shape what is perceived as perceptual filtering processes pass bits of data through cognitive stores of the mind to produce meaning. But because only unusual circumstances jar the mind out of ordinary filtering processes, the adage “seeing is believing” turns on its head and instead “believing is seeing” usually sets meaning (Lorber 1993). This perceptual dynamic is particularly true in establishing meaning in politically charged areas such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, as has been evident in responses to the candidates. Stereotypes and expectations shape perceptions of events according to what is believed about a candidate’s attributes, including a combination of race and partisanship of both the leaders and the perceivers (Nelson, Sanbonmatsu, McClerking 2007, 416). To understand presidential elections through an intersectionality paradigm, the persons’ lived bodies, lived experiences, and beliefs matter and must be considered. Each mutually constitutes other aspects of persons. Meaning forms through persons’ perceptual processes. That meaning becomes central to interpretations of public sector leadership. Importantly, individuals who share a category or two are not simply interchangeable.

Position: Institutional History, Demographics, Norms, Construction

Position is a comfortable concept in political science. We all grasp formal positions and formal authority derived from institutions. Through methodologies such as organization culture ethnographies and “soak and poke,” we even are quite willing to acknowledge informal organizational power, structures, and practices. The discipline has been less willing to acknowledge that U.S. institutions are not neutral for gender, race, class, and other salient categories, despite approaches to analyze the gendering of an organization based upon its function, history, social demography, formal and informal structures, and rules and practices (Kenney 1996; Duerst-Lahti 2002b; Dodson 2006). These same factors shape race and other intersectional stigmas also. Public institutions, as Hawkesworth has so well argued, should be studied for their race-ing and gendering. Anything less produces bad scholarship (Hawkesworth 2005).

Political Location: Time, Space, and Reifications

The final domain of Figure 1, political location, insists that candidates be situated in space and time and that contextual elements be incorporated. Political location is not meant to identify a concrete place, although it could, such as propinquity in office space near a governor (Rose 1993). Instead it suggests a metaphorical spot in place and time, and even a positioning vis-à-vis different kinds of time: historical circumstances (e.g., the evolution of the presidency), or a more immediate political place such as an election cycle at the end of partisan regime change, or even a breaking news story.

Hillary Clinton’s location as the first woman to be deemed a frontrunner for president interacts with her location as a former first lady, seat as the junior senator from New York, stance on the war, and earlier work on behalf of women and children. Her frontrunner status occurred after societal changes wrought by the women’s movement and a series of women, beginning at least with Shirley Chisholm in 1972, who have accustomed voters to female candidates. Similarly, Barak Obama is located ambiguously between phenotypic and cultural blackness, Christian up-

bringing and identity and a Muslim father, hope for a better political system and experience within it. John McCain is positioned as the familiar image of a white male president and dissatisfaction with the way things are going, a maverick image and a 95% Bush voting record, chronological and physiological age, comfort with experience and desire for generational change. In other words, political location suggests circumstances that take on prominence or evoke strong emotion through processes of reification. These circumstances can be exceptionally volatile, waxing and waning quickly. Yet, candidates as leaders must respond to these reified elements and their own political locations constrain how they do so because followers react accordingly.

Conclusion

The articles in this symposium tackle elements from each of these domains in this framework. Collectively they demonstrate both why insights gained by attending to elements of intersectionality essentially improve knowledge about presidential elections and how to approach topics related to presidential elections from this framework. They provide an intriguing teaser for the fruits that more extended research could provide.

Given the evolution of society’s ideas about race and gender, the historic legacy of the 2008 presidential election may most of all be a change in the U.S. imagination and reality; more types of Americans henceforth will be central to presidential elections. Our national lived experience of gender and race has changed with this election and is reflected in citizenry responses: higher primary season turnout, unusually intense passions among supporters, record fundraising, incredible rallies, and more. U.S. democracy indeed does have much to be proud as the 2008 election makes the myth that anyone can grow up to be president come closer to reality. In response, political science can open its study of presidential elections by greater attention to the mutually constitutive and intersecting dynamics of persons—candidates and other participants—with position and political location. The articles in this symposium provide excellent examples of the improved knowledge wrought from such an approach.

Notes

1. Donna Brazile, among other top political operatives, has stated often during political commentary that many believed Jessie Jackson to be viable in the 1984 campaign.

2. Masculinism has become the common term for the ideological aspects of patriarchy. Feminism is its concomitant. They both have several distinctive positions that run the full gamut of the left-right spectrum. Used here analytically, they can be defined as “an ideology begins from and generally prefers that which is associated with human males and females re-

spectively; these ideologies include the position of gender equality.” For a complete discussion, see Duerst-Lahti 2008.

3. Statement from the Annual Meeting 2008 Short Course on Intersectionality sponsored by the Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association, August 27, 2008.

4. While Toril Moi (1999) supplants gender with the concept of lived body, Iris Marion Young retains gender as an important concept for “theorizing social structures and their implications” (Young 2002; 2005, 19).

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