

**Article: Gender in the 2008 Presidential Election: Two Types of Time Collide**

**Author(s): Patricia Lee Sykes**

**Issue: October 2008**

**Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics***

***This journal is published by the American Political Science Association. All rights reserved.***



---

APSA is posting this article for public view on its website. APSA journals are fully accessible to APSA members and institutional subscribers. To view the table of contents or abstracts from this or any of APSA's journals, please go to the website of our publisher Cambridge University Press (<http://journals.cambridge.org>).

This article may only be used for personal, non-commercial, or limited classroom use. For permissions for all other uses of this article should be directed to Cambridge University Press at [permissions@cup.org](mailto:permissions@cup.org).

# Gender in the 2008 Presidential Election: Two Types of Time Collide

Placing the 2008 election in the context of political development reveals the gendered nature of the presidency and presidential elections. The institution of the presidency is predominantly masculinist.<sup>1</sup> It privileges conventional masculine attributes of strength, determination, and decisiveness. Yet the degree to which the institution requires masculinist leadership attributes varies throughout political development and according to different types of time. Viewed through a chronological linear lens, developments in “historical time” magnify the most masculinist aspect of the presidency—the role of commander in chief. On the other hand, in 2008 “political time” signals the end of the neoliberal era and a shift away from confrontational, partisan politics toward the building of a new consensus that emphasizes domestic welfare. As a result, the nature and stage of the regime cycle or moment in political time favor feminalist features of leadership such as collective engagement, cooperation, and conciliation. In the 2008 election, these two types of time collide, and the collision helps explain the gender-specific character of the campaigns, the candidates, and the next president.<sup>2</sup>

by  
**Patricia Lee Sykes,**  
American University

Comparisons across nations in the Anglo-American world as well as across time show that gender always pervades electoral campaigns and notions of executive

leadership. The gendered nature of the U.S. election is more apparent than usual this year because a woman candidate became a top contender for the nomination of a major political party. The candidacy of Senator Hillary Clinton exposed the gender-specific character of all candidates’ campaigns and carefully cultivated images, crafted to satisfy the historical institutional requirements of the office and the prevailing political public expectations of leadership. In the U.S. and its Anglo counterparts, institutions usually evolve slowly, while public expectations shift more often and can alter the weight of desirable masculinist or feminalist features of leadership. To a great extent, common legal, political, and philosophical traditions link Anglo nations in time and place, and consequently, they generate similar notions of executive leadership at roughly the same junctures in political development.

## Institutional Design and Historical Time

The legal foundation and political structure of most Anglo systems pose distinct challenges

for women because their adversarial institutional arrangements are highly masculinist (Di Stephano 1983; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995). To facilitate programmatic change, adversarial systems concentrate power in the executive, and to ensure accountability, they rely on combat between two major political parties. Women leaders in such systems usually need to show they are capable of being strong, determined, and decisive.

British prime minister Margaret Thatcher—the best known and most influential woman leader in the Anglo world—adopted exactly that approach. Thatcher insisted that she alone had a remedy for the problems that plagued the United Kingdom, and she promoted her public philosophy in highly masculinist terms by extolling the virtues of rugged individualism and fierce anticommunism. Moreover, she developed a distinctly masculinist style, which she described in the confrontational, combative language of “conviction politics.” It was that style as much as the substance of her leadership that conjured up the image of Boadicea—the ancient warrior queen—and earned her the appellation Iron Lady. During most of her premiership, the public’s expectations—in particular, their call for strong leadership to restore national greatness—coincided with and complemented institutional norms. For Thatcher, the two types of time proved in sync, but matching the masculinism of the moment in historical and political time forced the first and only woman British prime minister to play a commanding role by displaying a distinctly decisive and divisive demeanor.

To the masculinist character of Anglo adversarial systems, the U.S. adds the institutional role of the president as commander in chief, making the challenges a woman candidate encounters even more daunting. The institutional design of the U.S. presidency contains elements that create an energetic executive—a single person with the potential for a long term in office: essentially an elected monarch (Hamilton et al. 1987). Although fluctuations in presidential power occur, linear or historical institutional development has generally enhanced the strength of the presidency. Since WWII, in elections with only men as major party candidates for the presidency, the more masculinist candidate has usually won. Exceptions include presidents Jimmy Carter and perhaps George Herbert Walker Bush, but their fate as one-term presidents at least partially reflects their weaknesses as leaders and their failures to fulfill the masculinist requirements of the office by providing decisive direction. The empathetic “I-feel-your-pain” president

Bill Clinton provides another exception; yet, voters elected him after the end of the Cold War and before the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In fact, in the 1990s optimism about a woman becoming president increased, but events at the start of the twenty-first century shattered those high hopes. (The authors of the best-selling book *Madam President* even changed their subtitle from “Women Shattering the Glass Ceiling” in 2000 to “Women Blazing the Leadership Trail” in 2003 [Clift and Brazaitis 2000; 2003].) Status as the last superpower, the threat of terrorism, the war in Afghanistan, and the attack on Iraq have only multiplied the masculinist dimensions of the U.S. presidency.

Consider the few cases of women executive leaders in the Anglo-American world—other than Thatcher in the UK. In the Republic of Ireland, where voters have elected two women presidents, the president is nominally the commander in chief, but Irish troops engage in only limited peace keeping efforts, and the office of president remains a largely ceremonial post. Two women prime ministers have led New Zealand since 1997, and one woman briefly served as prime minister of Canada. In every case, women have led countries that lack the masculinism that goes with superpower status. Moreover, in theory, parliamentary systems make the prime minister only “first among equals,” not commander in chief. Nevertheless, in practice, the presidentialization and personalization of parliamentary systems threaten to make it increasingly difficult for a woman to become leader even in these countries. As a general rule, the stronger the executive office, the harder it is for a woman to win it, unless she emulates the Iron Lady.

In her presidential campaign, Senator Clinton attempted to follow Thatcher’s example and present herself as the strong, experienced candidate capable of tackling tough decisions on war as well as law and order. Throughout the nominating process in 2008, however, the Iron Lady approach conflicted with the dictates of political time: much of the public responded by perceiving her as cold and hard hearted, and polls repeatedly revealed the public searching for a conciliator, not a combatant, to change the Washington partisan battlefield. In the New Hampshire primary campaign, Clinton softened her image by showing a bit of emotion when she expressed her concern for and commitment to her country. “The tracks of her tears”—as Sky Broadcasting tagged the story—might have won the hearts of some voters in New Hampshire, but it predictably sparked her opponents to question her qualifications for commander in chief. Clinton found herself caught in a classic double bind: when she appeared tough, she seemed insensitive; when she expressed emotion and compassion, she conveyed weakness. In the 2008 primary season the cross currents of time compounded her dilemma because the commanding institutional norms of the presidency and current public expectations of leadership called for conflicting gender-specific qualities.

Clinton’s desperate efforts to convey her toughness account for one of her major mistakes. Describing her 1996 visit to Bosnia as first lady, she alleged she dodged sniper fire when she arrived. Instead, news file footage showed that she arrived safely and received a warm greeting. That incident proved especially damaging for a candidate with credibility problems. A very high percentage of voters already perceived her as a “phony”—a word the pollsters use—and the Bosnia incident only encouraged the public to continue to question her veracity. Husband Bill Clinton made matters worse when weeks later he falsely described the circumstances that led to her misstatement. Arguably, Bill Clinton’s career—not Hillary’s record—sparked suspicions about “the Clintons’” honesty in the first place.

The emphasis placed on the commander in chief makes character concerns a high priority, and the modern mass media magnify personal flaws, whether or not they relate to the role. The focus on personality rather than policies creates a situation that

places women at a disadvantage as they constantly struggle to shift attention away from the personal to the political, from their private wardrobe to the public welfare (Heldman, Carroll, and Olson 2005). Mocked for her tendency to wear trousers and criticized for her husband’s larger-than-life, looming presence, Clinton tried to transform the ridicule and suspicion into a joke by repeatedly reminding reporters just exactly who would be wearing the pant suits in the White House. Yet anyone who remembers the news about her neckline might wonder whether a commander with cleavage could prove more convincing in real life than in the short-lived television series called *Commander in Chief* (Han 2007).

Even though polls suggest Clinton managed to convince the public of her ability to command the troops, she nonetheless confronted the cross currents of time that collide—and collude—to the advantage of her intraparty opponent Senator Barak Obama. By gender necessity, Clinton’s commercials emphasized her commanding capabilities, her “can do” spirit, and her extensive experience in the White House as well as the Senate. (In a manner reminiscent of cold warrior Barry Goldwater’s girl-with-a daisy/mushroom-cloud ad, one Clinton commercial inquired, “Who do you want to answer the phone in the Oval Office in the middle of the night?”) By contrast, Senator Barak Obama’s advertising theme was “join,” an appeal to enlist the support of the disenfranchised, essentially a collectivist, consensus appeal. The candidates reinforced the message in their speeches to supporters. Clinton insisted she is capable, strong, and determined; Obama indicated he is open, inviting, and optimistic. As a woman, Clinton needed to respond to the institutional requirement of commander in chief intensified in the post 9/11 era and all the masculinist expectations inherent in it. As an African American man, Obama also encountered stereotypes and, for example, he needed to avoid alarming European Americans. For commander in chief, however, the image of aggressive black masculinity stands in stark contrast to notions of women’s weakness. Race matters in U.S. politics, and racism has generally obstructed opportunities for black men to wield public authority, but in this case simply by virtue of being a man, Obama satisfied some of the masculinist requirements of the twenty-first century presidency. In contrast to Clinton, Obama did not have to prove himself manly enough for the presidency, and as a result, he had greater room to maneuver and move in a direction more in tune with political time.<sup>3</sup>

## Public Expectations and Political Time

For several reasons, Senator Obama proved well situated to satisfy current public expectations of the president. His campaign stressed his ability to transcend traditional racial categories and bridge deep divisions—a major part of his appeal to young voters. The first African American candidate for president who did not participate in the civil rights struggle of the 1960s signaled a new era in generational as well as racial politics. Like Clinton who benefited from the women’s movement, Obama gained from the civil rights revolution, but he appeared able to move beyond the politics of the past, whereas she remained embedded in an earlier political time. When the media focused on his pastor’s provocative preaching, they evoked racial stereotypes and raised questions about Obama’s own patriotism and prejudice, but the story seems to have proven less damning than expected probably because it failed to resonate with his image. The public has tended to view Obama as a genuine unifier, not a divider, and Republicans and Democrats alike applauded his subsequent speech on race. In addition, the current political climate conducive to change has helped transform his greatest vulnerability—limited experience in national government—into a virtue, as he promised to provide a fresh,

new approach to politics. While Clinton struggled to satisfy the historical institutional demands of the presidency, Obama more easily played the part of an agent of change consistent with political time.

Political time creates shifts in both the substance and the style of politics, and at critical junctures, regime changes occur. For approximately 30 years, neoliberalism has determined the dominant regime in the U.S. and other Anglo countries. As an ideology, neoliberalism is highly masculinist. At home, its fiscal conservatism requires hard, cold, calculating cuts in domestic welfare programs, and many of those cuts hit women harder than men. Abroad, neoliberalism requires a fierce fight for freedom and unilateral action against international enemies. If fluctuations in leadership style generally occur within a regime cycle (Skowronek 2003), the variation has been minimal in the neoliberal era. Neoliberalism has magnified the masculinism inherent in the institutional executive by mandating firm conviction and tough determination more consistently than ever before. Throughout the neoliberal era, politicians who urge compromise, conciliation, or compassion concerning issues such as the budget or taxes get accused of “girly-man economics,” and those who question U.S. military action run the risk of appearing weak and unpatriotic. In the 2008 election, however, several signs indicate the U.S. could be on the brink of regime change, and the next regime might be more feminalist in substance and style.

At this juncture in political development, in the U.S. and other Anglo countries, the neoliberal revolution that rolled back the state and relied on the market appears to be in its final stages. The ideology has lost much of its vitality and viability in most countries where it took root, and in the U.S., certain events—the levees breaking in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, for example—have made the public more willing to consider once again the legitimate need for government. Opinion polls show increased willingness on the part of the public to envision government solutions to problems rather than see “government as the problem.” U.S. voters have placed domestic issues such as health and education prominently on the agenda, and voters are starting to support more collectivist efforts to provide economic security and ensure domestic welfare.

When the agenda shifts to the need for domestic programs, feminalist features of politics and leadership tend to surface. In the context of homogenous male leadership conditions, the gendering of leadership stems from the traditional juxtaposition of two approaches—scientific versus humanistic or authoritarian versus democratic. Recent analysis of such juxtapositions has exposed the masculinist and feminalist aspects of leadership in general (Rosenthal 1998; Duerst-Lahti 2002), but taking into consideration the type of time—historical or political—can also indicate the source and nature of shifts between gender-specific styles. Moreover, voters view “domestic” duties as female tasks, and they often consider subjects such as education, health, and welfare “women’s issues.” In the U.S. and other Anglo nations, when women move into cabinet posts, they usually deal with domestic affairs. Not surprisingly, Nancy Pelosi became speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives before a woman becomes president. The House plays only a minor role in national security and international relations, and legislative leadership in the domestic arena generally does not require the heroism of the historical presidency. Perhaps the emergence and dominance of domestic issues would have benefited a woman candidate for president if she had been able to exhibit and emphasize feminalist rather than masculinist aspects of her leadership. The renewed concern for domestic welfare also explains the dismal fate of the most macho contender for the presidency—former New York mayor Rudi Giuliani—who miscalculated that voters would focus entirely on matters of national security and admire his aggressive leadership style.

Instead, voters this year desire a different style of leadership, less macho and aggressive than in the recent past. As the primary election outcomes indicate, once again they are looking for a leadership style that favors conventional feminine attributes of compassion, cooperation, and consensus building. It is no accident that the next president will be a former legislator, not a governor, for the first time since Gerald Ford. The desire for a more cooperative, less confrontational style also helps explain the failure of Democratic candidate John Edwards, whose fiery assault on entrenched interests and attacks on the incumbent administration suited the climate of 2004 better than 2008. The current call for a softer style also seems to have sealed the fate of *Law and Order* star Fred Thompson, although his TV persona was only one of his many problems. In sum, the political environment right now favors a candidate who shuns confrontation, embraces cooperation, and seeks to build a new consensus, indicating the 2008 presidential election favors a feminalist leadership style. Yet the nature of this election also serves as a reminder that gender should not be confused with sex. Of the top two contenders for the Democratic nomination, Obama could exhibit feminalist traits more easily than Clinton could.

Competing types of time have collided within the Democratic Party during this selection season, and the closeness of the contest reflects just how strong these cross currents can be, but the conflicting concepts affected the Republican race too. Republican nominee Senator John McCain, the tough determined war hero who survived years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, has also tried to convey a soft side. He has shown a proclivity to preface his remarks with the phrase “my friend,” and he is frequently found hugging voters on the campaign trail. As a senator, he has also taken a conciliatory, bipartisan approach to some issues such as campaign finance. His carefully cultivated image depicts him as the good government candidate who promises to clean house. Even the truly tough guy in the contest this year has attempted to soften his style.

Within the Republic ranks, top contenders for the nomination also revealed their “feminine sides,” in tune with political (though not historical) time. When confronted with delegate counts displaying his dismal prospects, Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee would remind voters that in college he “majored in miracles, not math.” A top contender and the main rival of McCain, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney actually proved too compromising and conciliatory. His changing positions on issues ranging from gun control to abortion made him appear indecisive. (Critics quipped that Romney was not pro-choice; he was multiple choice.) His approach seemed much too soft for a Republican nominee, even in feminalist political times.

## Conclusion

While the cross currents of time run through both parties and even within the individual candidates, the two major parties differ in the type of time that dominates. The Democratic Party plays to the political, and the Republican Party highlights the historical. In the 2008 presidential election, the Democratic nominee exhibits a feminalist leadership approach and reflects the desire for change to a greater degree than the Republican does. The Republican candidate tries to keep the focus on historical time, the demands of national security, and the masculinist qualities that make him seem a more suitable commander in chief, better than any Democrat could ever be. Of course, sudden events could alter the dynamics of the political moment and tip the balance between the two types of time, but in general the relationship between time and the presidential campaign is reciprocal. Primary campaigns that played to different types of

time have helped produced the two major party candidates. The character and quality of the candidates and their campaigns will determine which stream of time proves decisive in the November election.

Accustomed to looking across the Atlantic to navigate history and chart political change, this year Americans might do better to consider our Anglo cousin countries across the Pacific. The first few signs of a shift away from the neoliberal regime occurred in New Zealand in the 1999 general election when two women led the two major parties. New Zealand news sources welcomed a “more feminine style of debate” (*New Zealand Herald* 1999) and declared the election was all “about caring, not daring” (*North & South* 1999). Since then Prime Minister Helen Clark has successfully (though slowly) shifted the agenda away from neoliberalism, a task made more difficult by three factors: the extent of restructuring in the 1980s, the fact her own party initiated the neoliberal change, and the public backlash that restricted executive authority through electoral reform. Across the Tasman Sea, during 2007 Australia elected its first Labor government in more than a decade. The new prime minister Kevin Rudd exhibits distinctly feminalist preferences and has adopted measures such as declaring Sorry Day, an official government apology to the Aboriginal Stolen Generation, and organizing his 2020 Summit, a meeting designed to solicit advice and ideas from the top talent in the nation. His attempts to

unify, build a new consensus, and engage the participation of the public provide a sharp contrast to the leadership of his predecessor John Howard, a close ally and kindred spirit of George W. Bush. Signs of change in New Zealand and Australia might provide the first ripples in a new wave of reform that will wash across the Anglo world.

While bringing gender politics to the forefront, the 2008 presidential election will also provide a clearer picture of where the U.S. is heading in terms of political development. A Democratic victory could signal the end of the neoliberal era and Republican Party dominance of presidential politics. The next Democratic president will have the opportunity to point the country in a different direction and promote an alternative public philosophy. By contrast, a Republican victory will allow the neoliberal era to linger a while longer—but if McCain wins, his presidency is likely to resemble President Jimmy Carter’s. Like Carter, he will need to hold together a crumbling coalition in its final stage of degeneration. The masculinist historical trend might put strong man McCain in office, but political time will generate leadership challenges that could cripple his presidency. A Republican victory would only delay but not deter an eventual Democratic shift in the direction of public policy and presidential politics. Whether that shift will also alter the gendered nature of presidential campaigns or improve the prospects for a woman candidate, only time will tell.

---

## Notes

\* I wrote this article during my semester as the Fulbright-Australian National University (ANU) Distinguished Chair in American Political Science. I would like to acknowledge and express my gratitude to the Australian-American Fulbright Commission and the ANU.

1. It might be helpful to explain some of the definitions and distinctions commonly used in gender studies. Masculinism privileges attributes associated with males, whereas feminalism (its conceptual counterpart) prefers traits associated with females. Feminalism also assumes female agency and includes women’s own preferences in its construction. It differs from feminine, a concept constructed by men, which treats women as weak and infe-

rior to men and masculinity. Finally, feminism comprises an ideological element of feminalism that, among other aims, seeks to enhance women’s power and achieve equality between women and men. See Duerst-Lahti 2002.

2. For analysis of several ways time can affect gender politics, see the symposium “Studying Gender and Politics Over Time” (*Gender and Politics* 2007).

3. Of course, this advantage disappears in a contest against another man when adequate masculinity becomes the issue and “what kind of man?” becomes the question.

---

## References

- Clift, Eleanor, and Tom Brazaitis. 2000. *Madam President: Shattering the Last Glass Ceiling*. New York: Scribner.
- . 2003. *Madam President: Women Blazing the Leadership Trail*. New York: Routledge.
- Di Stephano, Christine. 1983. “Masculinity as Ideology in Political Theory: Hobbesian Man Reconsidered.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 6 (6): 633–44.
- Duerst-Lahti, Georgia. 2002. “Governing Institutions, Ideologies, and Gender: Toward the Possibility of Equal Political Representation.” *Sex Roles* 47 (November): 371–88.
- Duerst-Lahti, Georgia, and Rita Mae Kelly. 1995. “On Governance, Leadership, and Gender.” In *Gender Power, Leadership, and Governance*, ed. Georgia Duerst-Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, chapter 1.
- Gender and Politics*. 2007. “Studying Gender and Politics Over Time.” Symposium. 3 (3): 369–408.
- Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison, and John Jay. 1987. *The Federalist Papers*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Han, Lori Cox. 2007. “Is the United States Really Ready for a Woman President?” In *Rethinking Madam President: Are We Ready for a Woman in the White House?*, ed. Lori Cox Han and Caroline Heldman. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, chapter 1.
- Heldman, Caroline, Susan Carroll, and Stephanie Olson. 2005. “‘She Brought Only a Skirt’: Print Media Coverage of Elizabeth Dole’s Bid for the Republican Presidential Nomination.” *Political Communication* 22 (3): 315–35.
- New Zealand Herald*. 1999. “Leaders Showing Little Inspiration.” Editorial, November 2.
- North & South*. 1999. Special issue, *Election 1999*, September.
- Rosenthal, Cindy Simon. 1998. *When Women Lead: Integrative Leadership in State Legislatures*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Skowronek, Stephen. 2003. “Presidential Leadership in Political Time.” In *The Presidency and the Political System*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Michael Nelson. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, chapter 5.