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Perfect Timing: The Rise of Women's Political Leadership during Cultural Shifts

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Christie Pearce

5 May 2012

Women's Political Leadership 4:30

Dr. Momon

Perfect Timing: The Rise of Women's Political Leadership during Cultural Shifts

As America approaches the one hundredth anniversary of the passage of the 19th amendment, the wait for a viable female presidential candidate is becoming grueling for the media, politicians and voters alike. After nearly a century of women's suffrage, it is high time for a woman to reach the pinnacle of American political achievement. The scarcity of women at the top rung of the leadership ladder is an anomaly that has been the focus of many a study, poll and book. Nearly every set of research comes to a similar conclusion: that America is not prepared to elect a woman into the highest office in the land. Though each study reaches this verdict by different means, there are similar veins running through each of them. The stereotypes, stigma and gender role constraints faced by ambitious women are the most cumbersome obstacles for those who wish to gain high office. However, through recent shifts in constituent mindsets, the favorable circumstances in the political scene and developments in campaigning strategies- especially through the use of social media- there has never been a more complimentary time for women to overcome these challenges. The potential for a female president has been in the making for decades. As with all dramatic societal shifts, this revolution in women's politics has been inundated with hesitation. Transformational political conversions always progress slowly and then reach a point at which there is an explosion of opportunity; this time is now.

The idea amongst the American public that men make more effective leaders has been bridling the potential of achievement-oriented women since the birth of our society: “ In general, prejudice toward female leaders follows from the incongruity that many people perceive between the characteristics of women and the requirements of leader roles” (Eagly and Karau 574). Women have been branded as care takers, and many studies have shown that this gender role has infected the very root of consciousness for men and women alike. Stereotyping, whether intentional or not, has become one of the most enduring barriers for women in the workplace. These automatic classifications can inhibit the progress of women and seemingly add another pane to the already shatterproof glass ceiling. People have a tendency to create categorized characteristics they assume every man or woman will fit into: “Since there are differences between women and men, we use stereotypes to anticipate and respond to these differences from the outset—rather than having to figure them out “from scratch” in each interaction” (Catalyst 5). Many studies, such as this Catalyst research, focus on the attributes ascribed to men as “charge takers” and women as “care takers”. Men are assumed to be “Dominant, Ambitious and Self-Confident” while women are thought to be “Appreciative, Sympathetic and Emotional” which affects people’s perception of their leadership capabilities (Catalyst 7). These assumptions turn people off of the idea of allowing a woman to lead in a business or political setting. With these stereotypical doctrines floating around in the minds of constituents, it is difficult for women to obtain substantial followings and support. These judgments also make it nearly impossible for people to see beyond the negatives and realize the remarkable leadership traits many women possess.

Studies similar to these by Catalyst have also revealed sets of data concerning to feminine and masculine behaviors, which have entirely different implications concerning the

potential of women in leadership. In a study in which corporate leaders were asked to classify ten leadership traits as predominately masculine or feminine, seven traits including “supporting, networking, inspiring, team building and consulting” were considered feminine (Catalyst 10). Each of these characteristics is valuable and desirable not only in CEO’s and business owners, but in politicians as well. Data shows that there is an unconscious consensus that women do possess sufficient qualities to be respectable political candidates. In a Pew poll, 2,250 American adults were asked to determine if specific traits were truer for men or women (i.e. honest, intelligent, creative). Of the eight traits inquired about, women received higher percentages in honesty, intelligence, compassion, outgoingness, and creativity (Pew Research Center). Men outranked women only in “decisiveness”, and results were tied for “ambitious” and “hardworking” (Pew Research Center). These traits ascribed to women indicate that there is no real discrepancy between men and women in terms of leadership capabilities. Not only are these results indicative of women’s abilities in fields such as business or general leadership, additional studies show that the majority of people believe that a woman could lead a country equally as well as a man.

Pew Research Centers also reported that in terms of politics, respondents believed that women are better at “working out compromises, keeping government honest, representing your interests and standing up for what they believe”. All of these traits have been ranked of high importance for voters when considering which candidate will be most fit for the job. Election studies conducted since the mid 1960’s have shown that “Important characteristics for the ideal presidential candidate... honest[y], moral character, and talk[ing] about nation's problems-remain important attributes for both the public and for the media” (Trent, Trent, Short-Thompson, Mongau, Metzler). The data collected by Pew Research Centers reveals that in fact, women do

possess the characteristics voters crave in a candidate, perhaps even more so than men. These statistics imply that the disinclination toward female politicians is stemming from perception rather than ignorance of the characteristics ambitious women possess. Since the prejudice against women has its roots in perception, and perceptions can be changed, presumably the prejudice can be changed.

The first step to shifting the perception of the American public is disproving the assumption that women are not fit to lead due to a lack of qualifications. Women have reached educational milestones that could only have been dreamt of only a few decades ago. In 2009, for the first time in history, more women possessed doctorate degrees than men in the United States (de Vise). Additionally, for several years, women have been outnumbering men in undergraduate level education (de Vise). With the number of women receiving college diplomas from the undergraduate level and up, there is no shortage of qualified females in the work force. The percentage of women receiving Law degrees is also approaching equality, and assuming a constant growth rate, will surpass men in the near future (Statistical Overview of Women in the Workplace). Considering these statistics, the upcoming professional generation of women will offer an abundant number of potential female political candidates. The recognition that there are hundreds of thousands of astute women in this nation will help disprove any existing misconceptions concerning the aptitude of women.

The next step in the removal of negative conceptions for women in the professional world is the subjugation of the double bind dilemma. The double bind modern women face is “a psychological impasse created when contradictory demands are made of an individual...so that no matter which directive is followed, the response will be construed as incorrect” (The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership). Women are forced to maintain expected roles in

society such as the role of a supportive, caring mother while simultaneously balancing the conduct of an ambitious, career minded professional. She is ostracized if she is stern and straightforward, but scrutinized if she is sentimental or compassionate: “the same leadership style can be described as assertive in a man but abrasive in a woman” (The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership). The difficulty of maintaining the precarious balance between these two expectations only adds stress to the already exasperating tasks their careers and household responsibilities require of them. The perfect balance between masculine and feminine characteristics is a difficult one to obtain, but it will be necessary in order to win over the majority of the American Public. People are reluctant to trust the responsibilities of Commander in Chief woman who is considered to be too “soft”, but a woman who is astringent will be seen as unnatural and therefore pernicious. Hillary Rodham Clinton in particular has been scrutinized for being too “robotic” when she is conducting campaigns and conducting political business. Although this trait in a man would be perceived as “taking his job seriously”, it negatively affected the public opinion of Rodham Clinton. On the other hand, the infamous teary-eyed interview she gave during her 2008 presidential run has left an impression on the voters that she is too emotional to handle the stress of that office. It has been problematic for her to meet the expectations voters have of the ideal “unisex” presidential candidate.

Other politicians, however, have discovered this optimal balance, which has changed the perception of feminine traits in a Presidential candidate. During President Obama’s 2008 campaign, he became the first male presidential candidate to embrace femininity in order to appear well-rounded in the eyes of the voters. Obama was faced with the task of reducing the media-induced fear of the “completely threatening and race-affirming Bad Black Man” (Cooper 633). In order to negate the impression that all black men are malicious, he down-played his

masculinity and embraced his care-taking and family oriented side: “He tried to place himself more toward the middle of the general gender continuum, rather than the masculine end that most Presidential candidates frequent, as a means of showing that he was on the good side of the specific black masculinity continuum” (Cooper 637). Rather than viewing femininity as a weakness, he embraced it and effectively purposed it as a beneficial characteristic. Women who seek the Oval Office must take into account this strategy of “Unisex” campaigns in order to appeal to both sides of gender expectations. It will be in the women’s best interest to embrace the leadership qualities society already perceives her to have, and combine them with the “Commander in Chief” factor that most voters consider necessary in a Presidential candidate. Since Obama successfully took on a gender role that was neither predominately male nor female, it is possible for a woman to adopt a similar strategy in order to appeal to the voters by balancing gender expectations: “While there is some implication that a unisex style is one that lacks the characteristics of either sex... a unisex style is one that a member of either gender can adopt” (Cooper 637). The American public has become comfortable with the femininity of President Obama, which has the potential to shift the perceptions of women in office, as well as the understanding of what an ideal President should act like in terms of gender.

One female politician that has prepared the voters for a President with a unisex gender role is Sarah Palin. Her ability to embrace her womanly appearance and display her mothering capabilities while concurrently portraying an assertive, competitive leader created an image of positive feminine leadership. Women admired her for her success in overcoming the double-bind and men were impressed by her ability to be combative at the appropriate times: “Palin’s success resulted largely from her failure to challenge gender norms while strategically emphasizing femininity or masculinity as needed” (McGinley 721). She knew how to walk the fine line

between being a maverick and overwhelming the public with second wave feminism. Her “hockey mom” characteristics perfectly portrayed a woman who was soft enough to raise children, but tough enough to be a part of the generally male dominated world of hockey. This role was practically metaphorical for her ability to be a mother in the political arena. She mastered the art of approaching a podium, speaking about her opponents in a way that was assertive and somewhat condescending- in male fashion- then sitting back down poised and ladylike with her family. She recreated the image of what a female candidate can look like: “it is the interdependence or the interaction of what a candidate does and says and the evaluative response voters have to it... that defines image” (Trent, Trent, Short-Thompson, Mongau, Metzler). Generally, the public was responsive to her methods; although her campaign fell short in the area of experience, Palin certainly tore down some gender-constraining walls for the female politicians of the future. America’s comfort level with femininity in the past few years has grown exponentially, assisting in reshaping the perceptions of women.

These shifts in perception could not have come at a more opportune time for up and coming female politicians. Some of the closed-mindedness that has plagued the political arena in America for nearly a century has been alleviated by the unisex campaigning strategies of these key players in the modern political scene. If the remarkable upcoming generation of women leaders is to take advantage of these favorable conditions, they must take on this contemporary “unisex” gender role. The successful introduction of candidates with such gender roles will affect the future of campaigning procedures for male and female candidates alike.

The components of the future of women’s political leadership we have explored so far have all been concerned with recent changes in the conditions of the mentality of the American public. Due to this shift in mentality, it is necessary for politicians’ campaign strategies to evolve

in order to most effectively reach these new-minded voters. Social media is now one of the most useful tools with which candidates can reach and effectively communicate with constituents. Social media, even more so than any other element discussed in this essay, has had a profound impact on nearly every aspect of contemporary life. Scarcely does one find a person who has not been affected by the surge of social media in one area of their personal or professional life. The modern day American's life has been permeated with this new web of cyber connections. These networking sites have the potential to change certain aspects of politics entirely, creating some possibilities that may have been unthinkable before its creation; among these, its ability to ease the difficulty or expense of other traditional elements of political campaigns. The implications this new type of media have on the future of politics are too great to be ignored by the future female politicians of America.

In the modern political age, gaining respect and popularity among the public is more crucial for women who have their eyes set on prestigious office than for men. A voter's personal perspectives and opinions of politicians now have more influence in final voting decisions than ever before. In an age where people expect to have access to information about even the most minute details of public figures' lives, the image portrayed by a candidate has an enormous impact on the results of an election. Social Media is an invaluable new resource to provide these connections between politician and constituent: "Just as social media has opened a dialogue between businesses and consumers, its value is apparent to those in political office, whose work and very professional survival hinges on the needs and perceptions of their constituents" (Silverman). Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are some of the most frequented websites on the internet, and certainly they get more traffic than the traditional sites that cover political races. If politicians wish to reach the optimal amount of voters, they must take advantage of these

opportunities to communicate with millions of followers at one time. “With 750 million active users, of whom 225 million are American (Facebook, 2011), sharing over 25 billion web articles each month (Facebook, 2010), the relationship between social media and news consumption is now a fundamental part of our media environment” (Messing & Westwood 4). With the use of a few social media websites, a candidate can touch base with more voters at one time than was ever possible with television, radio or print. Though unconventional, the use of social media thus far has proved to have immense amounts of positive influence for politicians in the eyes of their constituents.

The first politician to take full advantage of Social Media and the recognize implications it could have for his future in office was Michigan House of Representatives member Justin Amash. In 2009, he decided to start keeping up with his constituents by posting updates for them on Facebook. Anyone who was a “fan” of his page could see his posts about what he was working on in the House and the bills he was voting on. This transparency was greatly appreciated by his supporters: “I instantly received comments from dozens of people who wanted me to know how much they appreciated what I was doing. It became clear to me that posting my votes in real-time on Facebook could revolutionize the process of legislating” (Silverman). By conveying information in a way that was easily accessible and understandable that would otherwise require extensive research on the part of the constituent, he cultivated an even stronger support base for his future in politics. The sudden surge in support caused him to decide to run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, which he won at the age of 32. As the second youngest sitting member of the house, his success at such a young age can be attributed to his use of social media: “I wasn’t considering a run for Congress or any other seat when I began posting my votes, but Facebook has turned into a fantastic campaigning tool”

(Silverman). The application of social media completely changed the course of his career for the better.

So what exactly is it about social media that constituents love when it comes to politics? In the 21st century, when millions of pieces of information are at the fingertips of anyone with internet access, people want to have an easy understandable profile of the candidate they are considering voting for. Though in the past it was difficult for any average voter to assemble a full profile on a politician, including his ideologies, causes, educational backgrounds, biography, interests and personal life, it is now as simple as visiting the candidate's Facebook page. Obama's Facebook page left a lasting impression on voters: "One thing that really strikes me about Obama's Facebook page is how authentic he is. He has his favorite music up there, his interests, basketball, spending time with kids, Godfather I and II are his favorite movies" (The Dragonfly Effect). People are looking for candidates who they can comprehend and relate to:

"In modern presidential campaigns, voters expect a level of humanity and verve from their candidates. They gravitate toward those who seem relatable, as former Democratic nominees John F. Kerry and Al Gore learned the hard way. In every election since 1992, the more dynamic and down-to-earth candidate has won" (Cillizza & Blake).

Since women have been proven to be more effective communicators than men on a personal level, this new desire among constituents presents a perfect opportunity for an ambitious female candidate to step in and deliver to the voters a candidate that is personable and understandable.

Constituents appreciate the effort of their politicians to connect to them with clarity and without the media middleman. The popular news media has been notorious for putting spin on stories and not allowing the complete truth to permeate the media barrier between voters and politicians. This "spin" has proven on many occasions to be permanently harmful to politicians' reputations and campaigns, and many times women are more likely to be the victims than men.

Sarah Palin's media image is a prime example of the effect the mass media can have on a political reputation. Palin suffered many a blow from the media through quotes that were taken out of context and negative portrayals of her abilities and her family life. These dangers of the mass media are real for all people who run for office, but can be partially overcome through the use of social media. By having a direct line to the voters, the possibility of the media changing the meaning is all but eliminated: "Spin and misinterpretation can cloud a political message as it passes from candidate, to spokesperson, to media, to public. But this chain can be broken by something as simple as a Facebook update" (Silverman). The transparency of these messages allow voters to understand exactly what is meant to be said, rather than receiving a story or quote that has been warped by the media. Representative Amash believes that this greatly assisted his ability to "gain credibility with voters"(Silverman). He discovered that it enhanced the support and believability of his political positions as well: "when I say that I'm a principled, consistent conservative, people know that it's true. They can see it, and they can tell from our discussions that I'm actually reading the bills" (Silverman). Women who take advantage of this opportunity to develop "personal" connections with the voters through social media will benefit from eliminating the national news media from the line of communication.

Another advantage of removing the media from the politician-voter connection is the ability to be your own gatekeeper. One of the most influential roles of the media is its ability to pick and choose the stories it thinks should be on the minds of those who watch or read mass media. Since there are so many occurrences in the political scene on a daily basis, the national media must decide what is newsworthy. The media's ability to frame certain stories to give them more appeal, or not allowing certain stories to permeate the media barrier at all has a major impact on the campaign of a politician. In the past, a candidate could make as many statements

and endorsements as they wished and take part in any number of campaign activities, but they would really only make an impact if the media decided that it was worth their effort, money and time to convey it to the public.

Through the use of social media, a politician can decide what they wish to convey directly to the public. Stories can be more narrowcasted to reach voters in areas that a politician is struggling in. For example, if a woman is having difficulty overcoming the stereotype that she is unknowledgeable about the goings-on of the US military, it would be beneficial for her to convey to the voters information about her visits and conversations with military officials. Although a story this small would receive very little (if any) national news coverage, it could have a major impact on the voters' perspectives of her efforts in becoming an effective Commander in Chief. If she is having trouble gaining support in a certain geographical area, she could take part in a community project in the region and post pictures on social media sites. This extends the reach of this activity not only to the voters in that area, but in other similar communities. These stories that may or may not have been allowed through the gate of the national media are guaranteed to make it into the public eye when social media is utilized.

Each time a supporter "likes" or recommends one of these articles on their social media network, the possibility for other voters to be exposed to it grows exponentially: "when a Facebook user recommends a story, this information is injected into the Facebook news feed of all of the user's friends, which is shown by default upon signing in" (Messing & Westwood 5). The ability of stories and videos to "go viral" on social networking sites is a new opportunity for the spread of political information. This immense dispersion of information can be seen as a technology-enhanced version of grassroots campaigning. Although this strategy has often only been effectively utilized in small-scale campaigns due to the high level of maintenance it

involved in the past, social networking provides for an opportunity to gain support over a vast population of average constituents rather than depending upon the backing of elite beneficiaries. In past generations, grassroots campaigns required the posting of signs in neighborhoods, passing out of flyers and many visits to small communities, which included a lot of expensive materials and time consuming labor. Social media eliminates these challenges. Word can be spread electronically to the masses, which takes significantly less time, money and work and warrants better results. Grassroots campaigns have always been appealing to voters, and now social media makes this strategy applicable to national level campaigns.

The spread of political information via social media is practical for reasons beyond the application of grassroots campaigns. Political advertisements have always been viewed with a general sense of apathy and in some cases disdain by the American public. Traditional printed ads or commercials simply do not have the influence they used to, in fact in 2006 “close to 60% of advertisers [said] that they [would] spend less on conventional TV advertising; of those, 24% [would] cut their TV budgets by at least 25%” (Kiley). Contemporary politicians must follow the lead on this shift to unconventional advertising if they want to be able to reach the voters effectively. The buzz and support generated by these ads is not enough to compensate for the high prices of television ads. Advertising takes up the majority of a campaign budget, and the prices of prime-time ads are skyrocketing: “the average price of a 30-second spot in the first quarter of 2011 was \$108,956, up 5 percent from the year-ago period” (Crupi). If the effectiveness of ads is falling while the price is rising it is impractical for politicians to devote much of their budgets to this enterprise. Instead, it would be efficient to utilize social media’s advertising abilities.

These days, more buzz is generated by a “tweet” or a “post” than most ads, and not to mention an account on either of these websites is free: “While you can pay to market politics online, it’s arguably better to engage your network of supporters and let them spread the message for you. Their reach and trust value far outweigh anything you could broadcast or pay for” (Silverman). Getting politicians’ names “trending” on Twitter will draw much more attention to their campaigns than any conventional ad. Not only will this get the name of the politician out through social media, traditional media takes note of these trends as well: “Even traditional content sources like The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal embed stories recommend by each user's Facebook friends” (Messing & Westwood 5). News websites such as The Washington Post have up-to-date counts on the Twitter mentions of political candidates on the bottoms of some of their articles, which direct even more attention to these social media campaigns. If female political candidates combine the tactic of being their own gatekeeper and allowing these messages to be spread through the public, they will no doubt gain support without the price tag of traditional advertising.

Not only can social media reduce the costs of a campaign, it can also be used to raise funds. As Obama exemplified through his “Involvement through Empowerment” campaign, allowing the people to be your voice can be beneficial to the fundraising of a campaign. “The Obama campaign reached 5 million supporters on 15 different social Networks over the course of campaign season; by November 2008, Obama had approximately 2.5 million (some sources say as many as 3.2 million) Facebook supporters, 115,000 Twitter followers, and 50 million viewers of his YouTube channel” (The Dragonfly Effect). While traditionally politicians are dependent upon the financial backing of PAC’s, large donations from supporters and personal financial contributions, social media opens up new opportunities for public financial support.

Obama got more support from a wider base of voters than any other candidate in history because of his use of social media: “80% of the \$639 million dollars Obama raised came from donations that were 20 dollars or less” (The Dragonfly Effect). He achieved this kind of support through his use of social media. He brought in a “sweepstakes-like” component into his campaign which drew the interest of the public: “Over the course of the campaign, the team hosted two ‘Dinner with Barack’ events, broadcasting the events on YouTube and on the campaign’s website. Those videos went viral when viewers re-posted them on their blogs. The team selected four donors who had given any amount and who had shared their stories about why they were motivated to donate” (The Dragonfly Effect). This effective strategy would not have been possible without the application of social media.

The future of campaigning is in the midst of a dramatic change, giving young female politicians an opportunity to get a leg-up on the competition. Politicians who are settled in their ways of campaigning are discovering that there are disadvantages to the age-old strategies they have become accustomed to. The traditional method of polarizing during the primary elections in order to appeal to loyal party members and taking a more centric position during the general election in order to gain support of the general American public-many of whom consider themselves to be Independents- is becoming impractical in the age of the internet. Stances taken and promises made during the primary elections that are not followed through during the general election, and especially during incumbency can damage a candidate’s chances for election. It has become easier than ever to record and share even the most obscure statement through social media that shows the inconsistency of a candidate: “All of the elaborate strategies designed by the campaigns to obscure the positions, core beliefs and character of the candidates from public view will give way under the intense and unrelenting scrutiny of an interconnected, fast-

changing social media universe” (Cillizza & Blake). Politicians who are still following this age-old political formula instead of embracing social media for what it is will have a difficult time getting the votes of people who are following their campaigns through social media. “Having every public — and even some private — utterances readily available for anyone with an Internet connection makes politicians’ jobs that much harder. Forgetting past positions is nearly impossible, which makes voters forgiving you for them all the more difficult too” (Cillizza & Blake). Many of the politicians currently in the political arena are facing these kinds of challenges, setting up a position for a young, eager politician to come into the scene as a refreshing change for put-out voters.

Social media makes politics more accessible for unconventional candidates, such as women. The opportunities to spread political messages in a more pure and direct form allows for voters to get a true sense of a candidate rather than a skewed media or public created view. Social media as a campaigning tool is invaluable to politicians, especially those who are up-and-coming and not yet in the eye of the mass media. The familiarity social media creates between voters and candidates can negate many of the negative predispositions they may have about them. The shifts in political practices to a more modern and technological is changing the ways people think about politics, which allows an opportunity for women to step in and change the face of politics during this transformation.

The elections that will take place in upcoming years will be the most opportune time for women to achieve higher than ever before in the past. The forthcoming generation of women will have more capable leaders than ever before, and the conditions in the American political arena are more than favorable for women who wish to obtain high office. The public has been waiting for a candidate to come along who is educated, well financed and personable and the next

generation will be filled with potential candidates of this caliber. These women will have opportunities that are unlike any that were presented to their political predecessors to make connections to the voters and gain support unlike ever before. The mobilization of a group of people backing a movement or a political candidate is less arduous and more effective in the age of social media than at any other moment in history. The advantages these webs of social networking give to up and coming politicians can change the face of political campaigns and politics in general forever. In an era that is plagued with distrust in government and negative perceptions of politicians, women who are running for office can win over voters through the transparency and personal communication opportunities social media provides. The culmination of all of these favorable conditions for women is finally arriving. After nearly a century of biding time, the perfect opportunity for a surge of women's political leadership has finally arisen.

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