



UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE  
FAKULTA SOCIÁLNÍCH VĚD  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University  
Smetanovo náměstí, 6, 110 01 Praha 1  
Tel: +420 222 112 111

Evaluation of M.A. Thesis:

**Ondrušková, Andrea: Gender and the 2008 Democratic Presidential Primaries: The Case of Hillary Rodham Clinton. UK FSV IMS, Summer Semester 2010/2011, 87 p.**

In her thesis, Andrea Ondrušková looks in detail at the issue of gender in Hillary Clinton's campaign for president in 2007-2008. The author divided the work into four main chapters: in the first chapter, she introduces the broader context – the standing of female politicians in the American political system and the major challenges and prejudices they had to overcome in pursuit of their political role. The second chapter is dedicated to Hillary Clinton and her place in American politics. The author argues that Clinton is perceived as a highly polarizing figure, which she proves by various opinion polls as well as by analysis of biographies written about her and various articles in the press. The author also lists the most frequently used stereotypes about Hillary Clinton. The third chapter is dedicated to the analysis of Clinton's campaign, with special attention dedicated to the campaign's dealing with gender issues. The last, fourth chapter, examines the candidate Clinton's portrayal in the media for „media play a crucial role in how we perceive candidates because they function as the principal mediator between voters and candidates“ (p. 64) – here, again, the author pays attention to gendered (and often negative) coverage of Hillary Clinton. The thesis also includes a rather personal preface, where the author explains her personal motivation to examine the issue.

Throughout the work, the author tries to demonstrate the „gender in fact played a very significant role in the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries and despite the new ethos of gender equality that America hoped to see, gender still functioned as a (subtle, as the author adds later) discriminatory factor“ (p.2). She points out that „women are generally seen as less competent to hold public office than men“ (p.14) and that the presidential office is generally perceived as a masculine institution: „These masculinized expectations for candidates are subtly built in media messages, frames and routines but also in voters' heads.“ (p. 34) Even Mark Penn, Clinton's strategist, pointed out the challenge of gender by remarking that „the office of president has been traditionally associated with patriarchy“ (p. 35). This obviously complicates the female's effort to reach the Oval Office – while it is expected that female candidate will preserve her feminine appearance, she also has to prove that she is tough enough to make difficult decisions. This phenomenon is described as the „competence/femininity double bind“ (p.14).

The author correctly points out that the trickiness of addressing gender issues divided the Clinton campaign staff. While Mark Penn, diminishing the importance of gender, pushed Clinton to present herself as tough and experienced – almost mannish – candidate, others in the campaign wanted her to emphasize not only decisiveness and experience, but also her feminine side (p. 40). In consequence, the inconclusive debate over the strategy of dealing with gender (among other issues) complicated Clinton's campaign and ultimately contributed to her loss.

With respect to gender issue in the campaign, the author also emphasizes the role of a certain generation gap among women. While Clinton campaign believed that being the only female candidate, Hillary Clinton would easily draw support from all women, she underestimated her outreach. Many women then „had the feeling that the Clinton campaign took their support for granted“ (p.49). Clinton’s image of front-runner and inevitable winner, pushed for by Mark Penn, complicated the building up of her support – the author quotes Gail Sheehy: „Hillary showed no neediness. No vulnerability. Her fans did not believe she needed their money or volunteer participation. Before her campaign crashed, all her supporters had seen was a rich, superconfident woman backed by an aggressive campaign which promised to wrap up victory in early February“ (p.51). Additionally, Clinton also found it hard to connect with young women, the so-called post-feminist generation, who „had little sense and zero experience of institutionalized gender discrimination“ (p. 59) and therefore decided to vote for the more likable candidate - Obama.

In the last chapter, the author points to negative coverage of Hillary Clinton in the media – more negative than in case of other candidates (p. 68). Clinton’s coverage often brought back the tone of reporting from the 1990s during Bill Clinton’s presidency when Hillary Clinton was frequently criticized for transgressing the traditional role of the First Lady by getting involved in the policy- and decision-making process. In 2007-08 again, more often than not, Clinton was again portrayed as a power-hungry person and every her move was interpreted as a political calculation.

The issue of gender is rather difficult to examine, as the author herself admits – it is hard to measure e.g. by opinion polls because many people conceal their sexism and provide politically correct response. In elections, so many factors are in play (such as character, leadership, toughness etc.) that it is would be a grave misinterpretation to conclude that gender was the key factor for Clinton’s loss. Despite that, I believe that this thesis provides an interesting and well-researched insight into what role gender played in Hillary Clinton’s campaign and how the campaign dealt with it. The author successfully identifies the most important moments when gender came into play. Since Clinton was a pioneer in many respects – she was the first viable candidate for a major party pursuing the nomination for president, the first woman candidate who won a primary and who, for certain period time, was a front-runner – the lessons she learnt will be important for future women candidates: „Because she [Clinton] is the first she has tested many of the issues that are not about her, but about deeply cultural issues that have kept women out of leadership.“ (p. 31).

The author concludes that even though gender was not a major focus of attention, it was a discriminating factor (p.75): „The largest problems posed by gender in her campaign were rooted in the masculinized perception of president, (p. 76)...[and] gendered messages in which Clinton’s gender played out to her disadvantage. (p.77).“ Gender thus was one of the factors that contributed Clinton’s loss – although far from being the most important one.

Methodologically, the author uses chronological and thematic approach. The author did a thorough research into resources on the role of gender in the U.S. politics. For her analysis, she not only used academic works, but also primary sources – e.g. Hillary Clinton’s campaign memos, which were leaked to the press during the primary. Also, she worked extensively with opinion polls. Still, she could have used more primary resources during her analysis of media coverage where she draws mostly on secondary sources.

From the stylistic and grammatical point of view, the thesis is well written, with a few typos (such as Buchannan instead of Buchanan (p. 27) etc). The author sometimes hastingly jumps into conclusions, such as on p. 22 („...Americans did not really know what to think of her and so simply disliked her“) or on p. 24 („...she finally changed her name to Mrs. Bill Clinton, the national media widely reported on it and her husband eventually won“). Also, the title of the thesis is rather misleading. The author does not focus on primaries exclusively, her analysis covers Hillary Clinton’s campaign from the launch of exploratory committee in January 2007. In fact, large portion of the analysis deals with pre-primary period.

In conclusion, despite the minor criticisms above, I am persuaded that thesis written by Andrea Ondrušková offers an interesting, well-researched case study of Hillary Clinton’s campaign and therefore fulfills the requirements for M.A. theses. I propose the final grade **excellent to very good**, depending on the oral defense.

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Jana Sehnálková

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