

How Hillary Clinton Can Become America's First Female President by Darrell M. West, Brown University

Is Senator Hillary Clinton of New York poised to become the first female president in the United States or is she a sure-fire loser who will drag down the Democratic party in 2008 and keep the White House in Republican hands? Perhaps no political question is more riveting than that one as the second term of the George W. Bush administration starts to wind down.

It obviously is early to provide a definitive answer to that question. No one knows what the political environment will be in 2008. The state of the economy and the condition of the Iraq War are major unknowns as is the nature of the Republican opponent she would face. How voters evaluate her will depend a lot on the person whom the GOP nominates and how she matches up with that individual.

But those obstacles notwithstanding, this report will examine the Hillary Clinton question and suggest that arguments claiming she can't win underestimate her political potential and ignore her ability to moderate her image as a Northeastern liberal. Although many scoff at this argument, it is conceivable that Senator Clinton can make history and become the first female American president.

Five Reasons Why People Think Hillary Clinton Can't Win

1. Gender--One reason some observers believe Hillary Clinton cannot win the presidency in 2008 is her gender. According to this reasoning, the country is not ready for a female president. Women got the right to vote in the United States in 1920, but remain under-represented at every political level. Only 14 percent of the U.S. Senate and 15 percent of the U. S. House of Representatives are female, and these figures have barely budged over the last decade. Female politicians face obstacles such as overt prejudice, stereotypes in the age of terrorism that they aren't tough enough for the most powerful job in the world, and feelings that a significant number of voters would not accept a female president.

2. Liberalism--Another barrier cited about Senator Clinton is her background as a Northeastern liberal. Ever since the John Kennedy presidency ended in 1963, the only Democratic presidents have been Southerners, such as Lyndon Johnson in 1964, Jimmy Carter in 1976, and Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996. When Northeastern liberals such as John Kerry and Michael Dukakis have run, they have lost. Although Senator Clinton was raised in Illinois and spent her adulthood in Arkansas, the only election she has won was in New York in 2000, when she became that state's Senator.

3. Polarization--A third obstacle for Senator Clinton is she is seen as a polarizing figure. With Mrs. Clinton, voters either to love or hate her. Few people are neutral. She generates strong feelings on all sides, and is not someone about whom voters are ambivalent. This gives her a strong base of support, but also means there is a sizable bloc that would oppose her strongly.

4. The Electoral College--The logic of the Electoral College clearly complicates arguments regarding her presidential electability. With the winner-take-all provision of general elections, candidates must assemble enough states to win a majority of Electoral College votes. This has been challenging for Democratic candidates. With a strong GOP base in the South and the middle of the country, Republicans start a general election with a number of states that they can count on. This makes it difficult for Northeastern liberal candidates to win enough states to gain a majority in the Electoral College.

5. Washington Background as Senator and First Lady--The last reason why Senator Clinton will have problems is the strong anti-Washington sentiment that exists around the country. Four of the last five American presidents have been governors, not Senators or House

members. Democrats seem to fare best when they nominate someone from outside of Washington with executive experience, not sitting members of the U.S. Senate.

How Hillary Clinton Can Overcome These Barriers

The reasons cited above lead many to believe Hillary Clinton has little shot at becoming president. Between her liberalism and the political polarization that she generates, political observers feel she simply cannot win a national election.

Yet such a conclusion underestimates her skills as a candidate and the potential for her to overcome these liabilities. There are several ways that Senator Clinton can overcome these barriers and be in a position to become president. The following section outlines some of the things she needs to do in order to improve her odds of winning in 2008.

1. Moderate Her Image on Abortion--Liberal Democrats remain outside the national political mainstream on some social issues. On abortion, for example, the “pro-choice” frame ignores important developments. One is that advances in medical technology have pushed up the time at which a fetus can survive outside the body. When Roe v. Wade was decided in 1973, the point of fetal viability was later than it is now. The last 30 years have seen medical advances that allow fetuses five or six months old to be born and live as a human being. Liberals need to recognize that basing their abortion stance purely on a “choice” framework ignores important moral and ethical dimensions in the abortion debate, and leaves them vulnerable to “values” campaigns in national races. As a political and moral matter, it is imprudent for liberal politicians to make the argument that people should have complete freedom to terminate pregnancies beyond the point of fetal viability. It was easy to make that argument in 1973 when the point of viability was much later during a pregnancy than it is now.

2. Take a National Listening Tour--In 2000, when she first ran for the U.S. Senate from New York, Hillary Clinton was very successful at softening her image and boosting her vote totals from conservative and rural upstate New York by taking a “listening tour”. By showing that she cared about a range of issues of concern to those voters, she turned what could have been a close election into one that she won comfortably. This suggests she has more potential in a national race to win moderate votes than she typically is given credit for.

3. Being Polarizing is Okay if You Also Focus on Turnout--President George W. Bush was re-elected in 2004 despite being one of the most polarizing political figures of recent times. Talk that Hillary Clinton can't win because she is polarizing ignores Bush's own electoral triumph. There are many polarizing figures who have won recent elections because they use the intense feelings generated by their candidacies to play to their political base and thereby boost turnout among sympathetic voters. If Clinton can moderate her image on some issues and retain enough support on the left to rally her base, she can win in 2008.

4. Talk about Values and Develop a Religious Left That Matches the Intensity of the Religious Right--The biggest mistake liberal politicians have made in recent elections has been giving the GOP a monopoly on talking about values and morality. Democrats should note that education and health care are family values and they should not be afraid to discuss hot-button social issues. Giving the opposition party carte blanche to discuss a whole spectrum of values issues without a strong response is not a smart political strategy. It creates the false impression the party does not care about morality.

5. Have Three Home States and Develop an Electoral College Strategy of Midwest and Rocky Mountain States--Senator Clinton should use the fact that she has spent considerable time in Illinois where she was raised, Arkansas where she spent much of her adult life, and New York which she currently represents. This will help her break out of the “Northeastern liberal” box in which many people like to place her. From her Senate voting record, she clearly has more of a multi-faceted ideological record than the common critique gives her credit. She can be successful

in the Electoral College if she can combine current Democratic strongholds on the East and West Coasts with Midwestern and Rocky Mountain States that are politically competitive.

Recognize How Gender Helps and Hinders Her Presidential Candidacy

The biggest set of factors beyond Hillary Clinton's control is gender stereotypes. Analysts need to recognize that popular conceptions about female politicians cut both ways, positively and negatively. In some respects, being a female politician hurts her politically because of stereotypes that women are not tough enough on foreign policy.

In an age of terrorism and war, this is a serious problem for Senator Clinton. She needs to be tough and instill voters with confidence she can defend American security needs.

It may be no accident that of the women around the world who have won national chief executive positions, most of them have not been "touchy-feely" liberal women, but tough-minded conservatives. This would include Indira Gandhi of India, Golda Meir of Israel, Margaret Thatcher of England, and Angela Merkel of Germany.

It is important to note that these women came to power in parliamentary, not presidential systems so the election centered less on them and their personal qualities, but on their parties and agendas for change. The fact that Hillary Clinton will be contesting a presidential election where her name is on the ballot across the country poses particular challenges for her.

But political analysts should keep in mind that there are some gender stereotypes that benefit Senator Clinton. Women politicians are more likely than men to be seen as caring and compassionate. At times when issues such as education and health care are at the center of national debates, this is a plus for female office-seekers. If the economy weakens or people are suffering due to poor educations, unsatisfactory health care, or low incomes, this creates an opening for a female politician to play to stereotypes that benefit women candidates.

Political Factors Beyond Her Control

The largest uncertainty for Senator Clinton is the fact that the 2008 political environment is unknown and we don't know who her opponent will be. But after eight years of a Bush presidency, there is likely to be "Bush fatigue" in the same way that Al Gore was hurt by "Clinton fatigue" in 2000. At the end of any two-term president, voters often want a change, both in terms of party and personnel.

Some opponents would neutralize potential negatives on the part of Senator Clinton. If John McCain is the GOP nominee, neither has to worry so much about anti-Washington sentiment because both are sitting Senators. The pairing of that background characteristic would eliminate that factor from voter decision-making.

However, a McCain candidacy would complicate a Democrat Electoral College strategy based on Rocky Mountain states. Since McCain currently represents Arizona, he would be in a strong position to run well in states such as New Mexico, Colorado, and Nevada, which are all places where Democrats will need to do well if they are to recapture the White House.

Given the uncertainties about the political environment, it behooves Senator Clinton to adopt a strategy of "ambiguity" on some major foreign policy issues. Unlike other presidential candidates who need to take strong stances in order to develop political support, Clinton's high name identification, strong fundraising ability, and reputation as a political liberal will allow her to refrain from clearcut stances at this early point in the campaign.

The best thing she can do is to make strong attacks on the Bush domestic agenda and emphasize Democratic bread and butter issues such as education, health care, and jobs. Foreign policy is a much more volatile topic because of public unhappiness with the Iraq war. It behooves her to follow the stance suggested by her husband, former President Bill Clinton. He talks about mistakes that the administration made in Iraq, but still stresses the importance of

winning the war and protecting longterm American security interests. Candidate Hillary Clinton has the luxury of waiting to see how the war unfolds and how citizens feel about various policy options. In due time, it will be clear how quickly the United States should withdraw troops from Iraq.