



## Voters' choice in 2008: Mom versus Dad

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On its current trajectory, the race for president in 2008 may turn voters into children of divorce — forced to choose between Mom and Dad.

The contest comes as something of a surprise. Many strategists expected that Hillary Rodham Clinton, as the first woman to wage a leading presidential campaign, would decide to play down policies, rhetoric and campaign imagery that would remind voters — especially skeptical male voters — of traditionally feminine roles or issue priorities.

Rudy Giuliani, meanwhile, was supposed to have the opposite gender challenge. His image as the crime-busting mayor who rallied his stricken city after Sept. 11 gave him plenty of credibility on strength. What he needed, the thinking went, was to show voters — especially wary female voters — a softer and more empathetic side.

As it happens, the expectation that Clinton and Giuliani would spend much of their time playing against type when it comes to gender politics has turned out to be mostly wrong.

Clinton is indeed concerned about projecting strength. But she is doing it by unabashedly invoking her woman's perspective and presenting her diverse biography with a maternal emphasis.

Her campaign tour last week focused on "women changing America." She told stories of raising her daughter, Chelsea, while unveiling a new \$1 billion family-leave proposal.

Giuliani, for his part, has decided for now that his best side is his hard side. He speaks of taming crime as if New York City before his administration was an unruly adolescent — lots of potential in need of a firm hand.

At every turn, he emphasizes the threats facing the country in an age of terrorism — dangers he says Democrats do not understand. Of his own biography, he says it shows an occasionally flawed person who is nonetheless precisely the kind of aggressive leader the times demand.

If the two front-runners maintain their position, the precedent-shattering 2008 may in the end have a very traditional feel — a contest between two classic American archetypes, each designed in different ways to convey conviction and reassurance.

"If it does come down to Hillary versus Rudy, it is at one level a showdown between the iconography of matriarchal womanhood and the cowboy riding to the rescue," said Susan Faludi, an author who has spent two decades studying gender and American society.

In this vein, Giuliani invokes a mantra on the trail that “weakness invites attack; strength keeps you safe.”

He stated he would “guarantee” Iran would not use nuclear weapons if he were president. He has defended his conservative credentials, stating, “I gave my blood for the Republican Party,” as if politics were combat. He accuses Democrats of supporting “nanny government.”

Clinton’s latest rhetoric, in contrast, represents a subtle but distinct shift over time in her national profile.

As a senator preparing for a presidential run, some commentators perceived that she was positioning herself as an American, Democratic version of Margaret Thatcher — a woman who projected an austere and even martial bearing. Her campaign now believes that she has cleared a “threshold” of being trustworthy on national security, said Ann Lewis, her director of women’s outreach.

This has apparently given her latitude to put greater emphasis on domestic issues — such as her recent floating of a proposal to give a \$5,000 “baby bond” to every child born in the United States — as well as on maternal themes.

Last week at a YWCA in Manchester, N.H., she recounted the struggle to balance her law career with motherhood. “Late one night, [Chelsea] was crying inconsolably. I said, ‘Chelsea, you’ve never been a baby before, and I’ve never been a mother before; we’re just going to have to work and figure this out,’” Clinton recalled.

In a revealing contrast to how parental roles are invoked on the campaign trail, Clinton talks more about child-rearing than Republican Mitt Romney — even though he has five sons.

One challenge for Clinton is to promote herself as a believer in traditional values without seeming to abandon her roots as an outspoken feminist.

“She has to build a very big coalition, and I appreciate the difficulty of doing that. A lot of feminists tend to put people off,” said Frances Rosenbluth, a Yale political science and gender studies professor. “Hillary already has a reputation as not being quite normal, not quite average, not quite a regular American woman. She’s trying to say, ‘Yeah, I am.’”

The language of familiarity and comfort is found throughout her campaign. Her official campaign biography presents her as a woman “raised in a middle-class family in the middle of America.”

However, Clinton spent much of her life pushing very publicly against the confines of traditional gender roles — a part of her biography with uncertain political consequences.

In a 1969 commencement speech at Wellesley College, she said her generation was seeking a more “immediate, ecstatic and penetrating mode of living,” and closed with a poem expressing hope that “hollow men of anger and bitterness” and the “bountiful ladies of righteous degradation” would be left to “a bygone age.”

In the 1992 campaign, she stirred controversy when she responded to ethics questions concerning her legal work by saying, “I suppose I could have stayed home and baked

concerning her legal work by saying, "I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was to fulfill my profession."

Many stay-at-home mothers were put off, and she moved the next day to say she meant no offense.

Clinton's shift in the past decade away from the most outspoken brand of feminism may be a response to the shift of American women.

In 1986, a Gallup poll found that 56 percent of women called themselves a "feminist." By 2001, that number had fallen roughly 30 points, to a quarter of American women.

"My sense of [Clinton] is that she is, before everything else, a supreme pragmatist," Faludi said. "She is certainly careful to avoid spouting women's lib rhetoric, and that goes back to her being a realist, and that goes back to where the culture is."

Republican pollster Kellyanne Conway said Clinton is "an icon of the feminist movement who must run a campaign to appeal to women living in a post-feminist era."

This presents a constant challenge of navigating conflicting sensitivities. At one recent debate, Clinton spoke of her experience standing up to the "right-wing machine." If Democrats want a candidate tough enough, she declared, "I'm your girl."

Some feminists squirmed. "That might not have been my phrasing," said Feminist Majority Foundation President Eleanor Smeal, referring to the use of the noun "girl."

Even so, liberal women's organizations remain Clinton's biggest backers. Clinton's emphasis on family leave "resonates" with "women's rights activists," as Smeal put it. "Finally, someone is mainstreaming and centering our issues."

Women are the "critical swing vote" in the coming presidential election, her chief strategist, Mark Penn, wrote in a recent memorandum.

But if next year features a Clinton-Giuliani matchup, polling suggests Clinton faces a formidable challenge winning independent or even Republican women, as her campaign boasts it can do.

A Gallup poll taken Oct. 12-14 testing a Clinton-Giuliani race showed that 57 percent of white women, married or single, who do not identify as Democrats, have an "unfavorable" view of Clinton. Nearly three in four married white women who do not identify as Democrats said they would back Giuliani.

"These are women who want strength in their political leaders, not namby-pamby leaders who appeal to liberal interest groups," Faludi said. Clinton, by these lights, must prove her strength not merely for men but for women, as well.

But Giuliani likewise faces challenges in the gender politics of 2008.

He will be running in the dusk of the Bush era, a time when the traditional masculine political archetype that benefited Republicans for decades may have lost credibility with some voters because of the current administration's failures on Iraq and Hurricane Katrina.

Giuliani, Faludi posited, may find that, "Maybe it was a mistake to bet on 10-gallon-hat politics."

*David Paul Kuhn will be reading from his new book "The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic dilemma," at 6:30 p.m. Thursday at Barnes & Noble, 555 12th St NW, Washington DC.*