

Hillary rallies women's support

By DAVID PAUL KUHN | 6/4/07 6:41 PM EDT

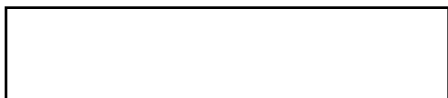


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On a recent Thursday night in Washington, as Hillary Rodham Clinton stood on stage, Geraldine Ferraro sat beside Madeleine Albright and Nancy Pelosi. It was a tribute to the victories of feminism -- the first woman to be speaker of the House shared jumbo shrimp and wine with the first female secretary of state. The only woman to be a serious contender for the presidency introduced the first female vice presidential nominee.

Clinton spoke of Ferraro as a bold congresswoman and emphasized her personal pride when Ferraro earned the Democratic nomination for vice president. But Clinton added that Ferraro had been "successful in doing the hardest job of all, raising a family."

There is a decidedly post-feminist appeal occurring within the Clinton campaign. And it features a very different Clinton than the young feminist at Wellesley who campaigned to end curfews or the Clinton who commented during her husband's 1992 campaign that she was "not the kind of woman who stays at home baking cookies."



Today, Clinton titles a section of her website's biography "mother and advocate." Notably, she

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places motherhood at the fore. The head of Clinton's women's outreach, Ann Lewis, explains that Clinton appeals to women because she has "advocated for children and families for 35 years." Lewis adds that Clinton's platform calls for "universal pre-K" education, to exemplify her appeal to women, not merely mothers.

"If you ask who I am, I'll mention that I'm a mom. Women do that," says Ellen Moran, the executive director of EMILY's List. Moran's group, which advocates for female candidates who support abortion rights, has endorsed Clinton. "These candidates are talking about who they are," Moran emphasizes.

But male candidates talk far less about being a father on the stump. When Clinton announced her candidacy, she sat on a living room couch, rather than standing at a podium before the press. Her theme was "Let's chat," touting her campaign as a "conversation." She stumps as a "listener," rather than as a lecturer or coach like Rudy Giuliani. Rarely is she without a dozen sympathetic nods in town hall meetings. On the stump, Clinton campaigns as the practical Midwestern mother. "I was born into a middle-class family in the middle of the country," she often says, mentioning at times that she was a Girl Scout.

Republican strategist Kellyanne Conway argues that Clinton is attempting "to repair the relationship she damaged with America's stay-at-home moms and grandmas," many of whom felt she disapproved of their life choices. "It's a shrewd political maneuver," she adds, "in that it allows her to expand her reach in pockets of women who have never really liked her, at the same time not alienating her base of feminists."

Clinton's campaign has taken a cue from marketing to attract female voters.

It's relying on so-called viral communication as much as traditional political advertising.

"Women are the most credible method to other women," Lewis says. "In a time when we are bombarded with commercials and advertising, people are even more interested to hear from people they know."

Each week, Lewis sends out "HillGrams" to thousands of women. When the campaign launched, 200 women sent e-mails to between 50 and 2,000 women. The campaign is relying on networks within women's organizations, like EMILY's List, as well as groups of businesswomen and female elected officials to establish a base of female support.

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"It's a novel way of doing politics," Democratic strategist Donna Brazile says of Clinton's marketing to women. "But then again, if she was a veteran, I'm sure she'd be reaching out to veterans' groups."

The Clinton campaign views its strongest base of support as African-American women and single women. The majority of women now live without a spouse in the United States. Should Clinton win the nomination, her campaign intends to focus on white working married women as its key swing vote.

"I think you are going to find a lot of women, even Republican conservative women, who are going to tell their husbands one thing and go into the booths and vote another way," Ferraro said in an interview. Ferraro has

pledged, along with other progressive women, to advocate on Clinton's behalf.

There are still echoes of Clinton's feminist youth. In April, on Equal Pay Day, which recognizes the gap between men's and women's wages, Clinton was a featured speaker at a rally at the U.S. Capitol. Last week, after the Supreme Court limited the time workers have to sue their employers for pay discrimination, Clinton pledged to push Congress to reverse the ruling.

But Clinton's more liberal views are balanced by her embrace of the full range of choices for modern women. She is advocating for women's empowerment, but no longer does Clinton demean those women who choose a traditional lifestyle.

"Will she succeed? We'll see," Conway rhetorically asks. "But did she have a choice? No." Conway pauses. "The thing with Hillary is, (it is) no longer 'Would you vote for a woman,' it's 'Will you vote for this woman?'"

Clinton's campaign believes she has passed a "credibility threshold" that female candidates often face. Clinton's strong stand on Iraq and terrorism and her service on the Senate Armed Services Committee indicates an effort to disprove the perception that women are weak on national security.

In France, just this year, liberal Segolene Royal failed to win a majority of women in her unsuccessful bid to be prime minister. It was a vivid reminder of the challenges facing the Clinton campaign. But Lewis believes that Royal relied too much on her gender and failed to meet the "credibility threshold."

Today, it's not solely Lewis who views Clinton's womanhood as an electoral advantage. Those who have known the barriers Clinton has faced, and will face, believe her gender will assist her candidacy. Pelosi calls it "a great help." Ferraro says it will prove a "benefit."

"You can't say, 'That's not what happened to you in 1984,' because I was not at the top of the ticket," Ferraro says. "Women are going to look at this candidacy. First (they will ask themselves), 'Is this the most qualified (candidate)?' And if they are really intelligent women, they will ask, 'What else does she bring? What's the value added?' And the value added is that she is a woman."