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A Royal Lesson for Clinton?


French Candidate's Loss Shows Need to Balance Gender-Based Appeal

By **JACKIE CALMES** in Washington and **ALESSANDRA GALLONI** in Paris
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(See *Corrections & Amplifications* item [below](#).)

Elections abroad featuring female candidates, including this week's contest in France, don't answer the question of how open Americans are to electing their first woman president. But they do offer this hint: Voters have become more receptive to females who project gender-bending strength and substance, as Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton tries to do, and more likely to reject those who don't.

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DISCUSSION

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Socialist Ségolène Royal lost her bid to be France's first female president after a campaign in which she played up her motherhood and underplayed policy details, while conservative winner Nicolas Sarkozy emphasized a hard-line platform against crime and immigration. In contrast, Angela

Merkel won election in 2005 as Germany's first female chancellor with a campaign so focused on the dry economics of tax rates and labor rules that female commentators complained. "She has not shown any enthusiasm for so-called women's politics," Germany's best-known feminist, Alice Schwarzer, sniped at the time.

Now, as Mrs. Clinton seeks the Democratic nomination, and the chance to make U.S. history, the dicey politics of gender are central to the New York senator's strategy. She uses her gender to advantage where she can. "This is going to be an election about change," and "one big one is Hillary's gender," says Ann Lewis, a top Clinton strategist. "The excitement she engenders among women is an important asset."

Yet in her campaign and beyond, there is a sense that while voters overwhelmingly tell pollsters they aren't opposed to a woman as president, in fact they expect women to meet a higher standard for toughness and leadership. That is especially true, pollsters say, for running the world's richest and mightiest nation. "There is a credibility threshold that women candidates have to cross that more often is assumed for men," says Ms. Lewis, even though "voters are far more open to electing women as a general proposition."

"One of the challenges is that 'commander in chief' is so much of the job description," says Democratic pollster Peter Hart, who conducts polls for The Wall Street Journal with Republican Neil Newhouse. "When you are the world's superpower, that is a hurdle that any woman candidate will have to deal with."

So Mrs. Clinton doggedly refuses to apologize for her 2002 vote authorizing force in Iraq, despite pressure from party liberals, and she vows swift retaliation if the U.S. is again attacked by terrorists. "Commander in Chief" was the Clinton campaign's headline on a news release after her promised retribution in answer to a question at Democrats' recent debate in South Carolina. "Hillary Clinton showed that she is ready to be President of the United States," it boasted.

Ruth Mandel, a professor at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey, resists comparing the U.S. and other countries, given the political and cultural differences. "With very few exceptions, the women who have risen to the top have done so in nations that are not the most powerful," she says. Often they are members of ruling dynasties, propelled to office by assassination or other political upheaval.

Political trends have linked the globe's democracies before. The ascension of conservative Margaret Thatcher as Britain's prime minister in 1979 signaled a trans-Atlantic turn to the right that was confirmed a year later by Republican Ronald Reagan's election as U.S. president, followed by the rise to power of Helmut Kohl in Germany. By 1992, Bill Clinton's election telegraphed a switch toward the left that presaged the rise of Tony Blair in Britain and Gerhard Schröder in Germany.

As for gender, observers of political trends say women have had an easier time reaching the top in parliamentary systems of government, where heads of state are chosen by their colleagues in the ruling party, than in places -- like the U.S. -- that pick leaders through national elections. Parliamentary governments produced some of the best-known female heads of state of recent decades, including Mrs. Thatcher, Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto, Indira Ghandi of India and Golda Meir of Israel.

That same dynamic -- in which a woman is chosen from among political colleagues who have seen their leadership potential first-hand -- helps explain why the U.S. has its first female House Speaker -- Democratic Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California -- before it has elected, or even nominated, a woman to be president.

In France, Ms. Royal tried hard to rally women voters. She emphasized social issues, promising stricter penalties for domestic violence and defending France's 35-hour work week for helping working women spend more time with their children. She appealed to mothers with reminders of her own four children.

"I want to urge those who hesitate to make a bold choice," Ms. Royal said at the end of a televised debate against Mr. Sarkozy days before last Sunday's election. "I know that for some it's not easy to imagine that a woman can exercise the highest responsibilities."

In the beginning, Ms. Royal's attention to women's issues boosted her popularity, helping her rise from back-bench Socialist politician to the party's presidential candidate in little more than a year.

But many say that in the end, she may have tried a little too hard to play the gender card. According to exit polls Sunday, Ms. Royal pulled in 48% of the female vote, compared with 52% for Mr. Sarkozy.

Analysts say gender wasn't the decisive factor. They say Mr. Sarkozy had a clearer platform on economic issues, and Ms. Royal's Socialist Party was unable to pull together and woo the country's centrist voters.

Still, in France -- where as in the U.S., women represent a slight majority of registered voters -- many female voters came to believe Ms. Royal didn't show leadership qualities and too often blamed sexism for her campaign's problems.

--Marc Champion in Brussels and Marcus Walker in Berlin contributed to this article.

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Corrections & Amplifications:

The last name of Indira Gandhi, former prime minister of India, was misspelled as Ghandi in this article.

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