

Battle lines harden on the gender front

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In the comfort of her home, and in the company of Ben & Jerry's ice cream (New York Super Fudge Chunk), Joan McLean settled in on Tuesday night for an evening of channel surfing as the results of the Texas and Ohio primaries started tumbling in.

Prof. McLean had spent the day at Ohio Wesleyan University, the small liberal arts college where she teaches courses in U.S. politics and the mass media. The weather wasn't great, but the mood on campus was electric. "You couldn't really walk anywhere without people saying, 'What do you think is going to happen?'" Prof. McLean recalls.

The professor's bona fides as a political observer are considerable, especially her role as adviser to Geraldine Ferraro in 1984, having been part of a coterie of politically charged women who helped persuade Ms. Ferraro to make her historic bid to be the first female vice-president in the nation's history.

Nearly a quarter-century on, Prof. McLean's political engagement has not wound its way to a stereotypical present: She supported John Edwards, who, she says, cleaved closer to her concerns about poverty and economic issues.

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"If you had told me in 1984, when I worked for Gerry Ferraro, that there would be a race in which there was an African-American male, a woman and a white male and that I would end up supporting the white male, I would have told you you were crazy," Prof. McLean says. "But in a way that's what we've been fighting for, the ability to choose candidates not based on race and gender."

It has not escaped Prof. McLean's notice that this is not the way the Democratic race is currently playing. "I've had people say to me that you can't be a good feminist of this generation and not support her," she says of the candidacy of Hillary Clinton. "That this is our only chance."

By "only chance," Prof. McLean means that if it takes another 24 years to get a woman on the ticket, a Clinton win is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for women of a certain age. This narrative often ends in a somewhat contorted construction: that after a decades-long battle for gender neutrality, a vote for Barack Obama equates to a vote for sexism.

Ever the strategist, the task now for Ms. Clinton as she powers toward Pennsylvania is to continue to capitalize on this recall to arms without appearing to do so in an obvious way, a tricky bit of postfeminist theatre. In her victory speech this week in Ohio, the senator – looking powerful and, well, fabulous – telegraphed the hear-me-roar message by reading an e-mail she had received. It began: "My two daughters are 2 and 4 and we chant and cheer for you at every speech we see. I want them to know anything is possible."

Rising to her theme, Ms. Clinton continued: "Tonight I say to them, keep on watching. Together we are going to make history." (Bill Clinton was nowhere to be seen; Chelsea Clinton appeared briefly by her mother's side.)

"I think if they're smart, they're going to make this the theme of the campaign henceforth," says Susan Carroll, a professor of political science at Rutgers University, senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics and the author of *Women as Candidates in American Politics*. "Obviously she is a woman running for office. It signals the significance of that to women and highlights it without saying, 'I am woman. I am change.'" Anyone looking for a thesis for a PhD in women's studies would do well to start researching now how Ms. Clinton's foes and her allies have each played the gender card. There's Rush Limbaugh. ("Will this country want to actually watch a woman get older before their eyes on a daily basis?") And that heckler in New Hampshire. ("Iron my shirt.") And, tossing hot oil directly on the fire, comments from Obama adviser Samantha Power: "She is a monster," Ms. Power said in an interview with *The Scotsman*. "You just look at her and think, Ergh." Ms. Power resigned yesterday.

Ms. Clinton herself dropped the card last fall when she released her "Politics of Pile-On" video, made in the wake of an all-candidates debate in which she took fire from the full roster of male opponents. As Ms. Clinton expressed it, the encounter exemplified the all-boys club of national politics as opposed to the other way of looking at it: piling on the front-runner. *The Today Show's* Matt Lauer cringingly asked Mr. Obama whether this wasn't about "guys" attacking a "gal," to which the senator responded, "The first time that people start challenging her point of view, she suddenly backs off and says, 'Don't pick on me.'" By the time Ms. Clinton's voice started catching in that coffee shop in New Hampshire, she had begun to appear, or allowed herself to appear, victimized.

Gloria Steinem launched her now infamous New York Times op-ed piece, published in January, in which she reasserted that "gender is probably the most restricting force in American life."

If there was a tipping point in the campaign, this was it. On the one hand, the coffee-shop moment buttressed the views of those who would

choose to dismiss her, as if, as Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women, puts it, “a little mist in her eyes meant she was too whacked out to be commander-in-chief.”

More crucially, the sight of seeing a more textured Ms. Clinton had the greater effect of mobilizing the troops. “I think in New Hampshire there was a sense that she was being dismissed,” Prof. McLean says, “and that feeling among women triggered something.”

Without a doubt, the emotive moment helped the senator solidify her support among older women voters, a “base,” to use a favourite term of President George W. Bush, that gets behind her when she's down, as it did in New Hampshire – and this week in Ohio, according to exit polls.

As did the way in which she has capitalized on the now much-examined media tilt, artfully caricatured by *Saturday Night Live's* mock debates in which a faux Tim Russert aggressively grills a Ms. Clinton character while softly stroking the sleek pelt of Mr. Obama's double.

Russert: “Senator Clinton: Nigeria's foreign affairs minister, can you name him?”

Clinton: “I ... I don't know.”

Russert: “Ojo Maduekwe. Senator Obama, same question.”

“I think that, particularly in terms of the most recent period, Obama has clearly got a more favourable, how can one put it, an easier ride from the press than Hillary has,” says Pippa Norris, professor of political science at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. “But it's not clear whether or not that's because she's Hillary or because of her gender. I think it's probably a combination of both.”

Being Ms. Clinton means hauling 30 years of political baggage onto the main stage. “It's incredibly difficult to disentangle how people have treated her as a result of being somebody that everybody has known for such a long time, being the wife of the president ... and being disliked by those who dislike the Clintons as a couple in terms of their policies,” Prof. Carroll says.

This is not to ignore the fault lines that, at least initially, ran through the Clinton campaign. “I do think a lot of her campaign strategy, and a lot of the decisions she's made, have been constrained by gender,” Prof. Carroll continues. “I think the strategy that the campaign adopted from the very beginning was to establish her as tough and experienced. I think the fact that they made that choice ... was due to the fact that she's a woman.”

Did Clinton strategists have a choice? “It's always a challenge for a woman running for any significant office to prove she's tough enough for the job,” Prof. Carroll says.

A quarter-century ago, the same dilemma faced Geraldine Ferraro. “In the 1984 election, [Ronald] Reagan had to convince people he would not start a war, push the button,” recalls Joan McLean. “And Ferraro had to convince people that she could.”

(Ditto Ms. Clinton. There's an unsettling, almost creeped-out feel to what has been dubbed Ms. Clinton's red-phone television ad. A camera scans across the snoozing faces of little ones. *It's 3 a.m. and your children are safe asleep. But there's a phone in the White House and it's ringing. Something's happening in the world.* ... Hillary Clinton, the viewer understands, has the toughness and experience to take the call.)

In an interview 10 days ago, CNN's Judy Woodruff asked Ms. Clinton what difference it would make having a woman president. “Oh, I don't even think we can adequately imagine the difference it would make,” Ms. Clinton replied. “It would be the shattering of the highest and hardest glass ceiling.”

Did the senator want women to vote for her because she was a woman, Ms. Woodruff wanted to know?

“No,” Ms. Clinton responded. “I've said consistently through this campaign that, you know, I'm asking people not to vote for me solely because I'm a woman. But I'm a woman.”

Ms. Clinton's gender does not carry the same weight with younger women as it does with the generation who fought for women's rights from the 1960s and 1970s on.

“When I'm talking to my female students, I'll ask them, especially those who are supporting Obama ... ‘Historically, does it matter to you whether it's a woman?’” recounts Prof. McLean. “To them, historically, either one is a choice. They don't have the ownership of gender.”

Prof. McLean says she saw a lot of people agonizing on Tuesday, unsure of which way to cast their vote. The professor has thrown her support behind Ms. Clinton, but not easily. “Here's my dilemma,” she says. “I am pretty confident [Mr. Obama] can lead, but I don't know if he can govern. I am pretty confident [Ms. Clinton] can govern, I don't know if she can lead.”

At Clinton headquarters on Thursday, the senator's supporters were giving great thanks for the women who turned out in numbers. “I'm pulling out the exit-poll data that show two things,” senior adviser Ann Lewis said in a quick interview. “One is the number of women who turned out to vote, an even higher percentage than in previous years. The second is their strong support for Hillary. We want to get that word back out to the women who have been working so hard for her to say a big thank you.”

The battle lines have been hardened, and they've been hardened on the gender front.

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