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# America's Sexiest Man vs. Plain Jane: Sexism and the Massachusetts U.S. Senate election



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SEX MATTERS

It was a Massachusetts man, John F. Kennedy, who once said, "Victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan."

I've been thinking about the poignancy of his words after the Massachusetts election to fill the Senate seat of the late Ted Kennedy. I won't rehash the campaign between the winner, Scott Brown, who storms Capitol Hill wreathed in smiles, and the loser, Martha Coakley, who's left alone to lick her wounds. Yet, I will discuss sexism in the campaign, because the media made some biased comments that worked to Brown's advantage and Coakley's disadvantage.

Take a couple of articles by Liz Robbins in *The New York Times*. In one, she calls Brown "charismatic," and writes: "Campaigning as vigorously as he trains for triathlons, Mr. Brown and his physique caused a stir when *Cosmopolitan*, on its website, reprised a 1982 centerfold that



featured him nearly naked as America's Sexiest Man."

Robbins didn't have many nice things to say about Coakley in her companion piece, though. "Ms. Coakley, who wears crisp pantsuits and short layered blond hair, has been called cool and guarded, talking little about her personal life other than her marriage, at age 47, to a former Cambridge deputy police superintendent," Robbins writes.

So, readers learned about "America's Sexiest Man" and the crisp pantsuits and layered hair of a decidedly Plain Jane. We live in a sexualized, media-driven society, so which candidate do you think won this image battle? Without question, it was Brown-the handsome, charming antithesis to a dour and dull Coakley.

In all fairness to Robbins, she gave a balanced summary of the candidates' opposing positions, but her image of their very different personalities and physical attributes lingered in my mind longer than their points of view. Although she didn't call Brown a "hunk," Robbins sure left the impression that he was pretty sexy-and as we all know, sex sells.

Her mention of Coakley's pantsuit reminded me of the many unflattering comments directed at Hillary Clinton during her bid for the presidency. These comments often dwarfed discussion of policy differences between her and her opponent. I remember this quote of hers when the primary battles were at their fiercest: "When Senator Obama gets up in the morning, he can go to the gym," Clinton said. "Not me. I have to get my hair done and decide which clothes to wear for the day ahead."

Clinton, Coakley, and all women who run for higher office are on the horns of a dilemma as long as their clothing and hairstyles provide fodder for the media.

If the media insist on reporting about female politicians' hairstyles and clothing, then they should report the same about their male counterparts. For instance, we know that Brown posed nearly naked, but do we know whether he wears sports shirts or suits on the campaign trail, or if his hair is a many-layered, curly, or thinning? What's sauce for the goose should be sauce for the gander, or there should be no sauce-and no coverage-of these extraneous issues.

Speaking of "nearly naked," how would we feel about a female Senate candidate who once posed for *Cosmo* wearing next to nothing? Some years ago, a newly crowned Miss America had to give up her throne because she had once posed nude for some calendar art, and the pictures ended up on the Internet. If any such female Senate candidate had posed like that, the double standard would have reared its ugly head and she would have been driven from the race.

Then there's what I call "the glamour factor," which is becoming more and more important in political races between women and men. In the Massachusetts race, Brown's family increased his glamour factor. His wife is a local television reporter, and as we know from watching any news program, if you're not thin and gorgeous with a flashing smile and perfect teeth, you certainly can't report the news. Brown's two adult daughters are also extremely attractive and campaigned with him.

Oh the other hadn, Coakley-having married late and had no children-had to go it alone. At her campaign's end, Vicki Reggie Kennedy, Senator Kennedy's wife, came in to give her a badly needed touch of glamour. In the final days, President Obama tried to bring this glamour to the sinking Plain Jane, too, but it didn't do the trick.

Women candidates, beware: Soon glamour may be what political campaigns are all about. Men don't need to worry about this part of campaigning (the Christie-Corzine contest is a case in point), but if our society continues to be so celebrity obsessed, beautiful, sexy women may have a better shot at the prize than women who are considered unattractive.

I asked Debbie Walsh, the director of the [Center for American Women and Politics](#) at Rutgers University, whether I rightly detected sexism against female candidates. "Unfortunately, it's still true that when women run for high-level elective office, they encounter intense scrutiny of their physical appearance," Walsh responded. "Whether it is Hillary Clinton running for President, Sarah Palin running for Vice President, or, most recently, Martha Coakley's run for the U.S. Senate, this scrutiny can adversely affect the outcome of a close race."

Sexism may only have played a small role in the outcome of the Massachusetts election, but it surely was present. John F. Kennedy's poignant words "defeat is an orphan" are now Martha Coakley's to absorb alone. But the sexist attitudes that still abound at the highest levels of American politics still remain for all of us to ponder.

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