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Authenticity and Emotion: Hillary Rodham Clinton's Dual Constraints

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After the publication of *What Happened*, much attention was directed toward analyzing and commenting on a section of Hillary Rodham Clinton's book that detailed her thinking in a split-second situation during one of the presidential debates with Donald Trump. Clinton explains that during the second debate, which occurred just days after the release of the famous *Access Hollywood* tape in which Trump "bragged about groping women" (Clinton 2017, 136), Trump was more or less following her around the small stage, "staring at [her], making faces" (136). She notes that it was "incredibly uncomfortable. He was literally breathing down my neck" (136). But she also considers her response to Trump's physically threatening demeanor during the debate and whether she responded appropriately or "correctly." Clinton kept her cool — she kept going in the face of what she describes as a physically menacing situation. She refused to be "rattled" by Trump's proximate presence or by the individuals he invited to sit in the audience to intimidate her.

Clinton wonders whether she should have let her anger loose during the course of the debate and, instead of remaining calm, become aggrieved and angry. She notes that she knew if she had displayed this kind of anger and irritation, it would have become an immediate attack ad directed at her,

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that the Trump campaign and the Republican opposition would have capitalized on her losing her cool. Clinton recalls, in the chapter "On Being a Woman in Politics," that she had previously lost her cool, or, as she says, she "hadn't tamed [her] tongue," when pressed during her husband's campaign for the presidency in 1992 about her position in a law firm in Arkansas. She expressed her true opinion when she was asked about this by the media: "I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was pursue my profession" (118). Famously, this quip became a line of attack against her and against her husband — at once profiling her irritation and anger at the implication and opening the door to critiques that she had insulted the housewives of America. Clinton explains in *What Happened* that the response to her comments in 1992 was something she never forgot, and she internalized this as she continued to operate on the public stage. At the same time, though, she concludes the chapter by noting how Beyoncé had, in displaying Clinton's quote in huge letters on a giant screen at one of the closing events of the 2016 campaign, "reclaimed [the quote] as a message of independence and strength."

Clinton's political life, though, reflected her lesson from that incident in 1992 and how her responses to questions — no matter how insulting or irritating — need to be measured, thoughtful, and calm. In fact, they needed to be, in some form, inauthentic so as not to display anger or be misunderstood. This is a political double bind for women — everything, from the sound of their voices to the caliber and kinds of comments, needs to fit within a very narrow spectrum. Otherwise they will be accused of hysteria, of having grating, irritating voices that cannot be "heard" by the public because they are so angry. The decibel level is limited. But so is the content of responses or arguments.

Clinton's analysis and experience support much of the broader research on the constraints faced by female candidates. Obviously, in Clinton's case, those particular issues were exacerbated by her long years in politics (from a number of perspectives and positions) and by the office she sought — the presidency. Clinton, as the revolutionary that she calls herself, notes that she "hasn't just been a participant in this revolution [for gender equality]. I've help lead it" (113). But even as a groundbreaking feminist, she is still restricted in her anger. She, as a politician, is not really allowed to be angry. She is not allowed to inspire negative emotional responses among her supporters or in campaigns. In analyzing her own political style, Clinton explains that it "can be viewed as female. I've always focused on listening over speaking" (135).

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Female candidates, like African American politicians and candidates, are constrained in a way that white male politicians are not; these "deviations from the norm" are not allowed the full range of emotional responses to the world and to policy because emotional responses from women, or from African Americans, may be received by voters and by commentators and pundits as unnerving. There seems to be a connection between authenticity and emotion, especially anger — a connection that white male politicians are able to capitalize upon, but, as Clinton notes, she and other female politicians are precluded from this approach in politics, since it immediately brings a negative critique. Clinton notes that the words used to describe "women who lead" are generally negative: "angry, strident, feisty, difficult, irritable, bossy, brassy, emotional, abrasive, high-maintenance, ambitious" (119).

Clinton's commentary throughout this chapter on being a woman in politics focuses on the gendered distinction of leadership styles and capacities: the approach that women take to operating in American politics is both undervalued and a deviation from the approach that men take, and thus if a woman were to operate in politics like a man, she is not comporting with expectations in regard to her gender, nor is she operating in context of the less threatening expectations of women in American politics (136).[1]

As Clinton notes in her book, and as we all observed during the course of the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump inspired his supporters to become vocally and even physically angry, leading them in chants that reflected their anger at his campaign rallies. He led his followers to become even more emotional, and that direct appeal to the anger embedded in his political base made Trump look like a "straight shooter," someone who tells it like it is. The Trump approach was to "dismiss all this political correctness" and really address issues, without worry, without consideration of who might be offended by the words or the policies. Thus, Trump was cast as authentic, while his more careful GOP opponents during the primary, and then Clinton during the general election, were cast as too wary, as inauthentic, as politically correct. They were all constrained by political expectations. Trump, as an outsider, as someone who was running for office in a fairly novel way, was conceived of as more authentic, but that authenticity is, as political

1. Also consider, in comparison to women elected to legislative positions, the very few women who have been elected to governor's offices (Clinton 2017, 40), another example of the gendered norm often associated with executive positions.

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scientist Brendon Nyhan (2015) notes, based on performance skills, on how an individual politician is seen and consumed by the public.

Clinton's long journey in American politics has cast her in many roles, but any penchant for public displays of emotion has been trained out of her. As she explains, the higher you go in politics as a woman, the more constraining are the demands on how you present yourself to the public: "[T]he balancing act women in politics have to master is challenging at every level, but it gets worse the higher you rise. If we're too tough, we're unlikeable. If we're too soft, we're not cut out for the big leagues. If we work too hard, we're neglecting our families. If we put family first, we're not serious about the work" (119).

Thus, what Clinton reflects upon in her considerations of being a woman in politics is the limitation on being your authentic self (whatever that might be) since her experience is that, regardless of who you actually are, as a woman in politics, you must conform to expectations or norms that are extremely difficult for women to fulfill.

The idea of authenticity in politics is, as political scientist Julia Azari (2015) has written, code for "our thinking about the presidency," which also has gender implications since "it's all about power and dominance." This is part of Clinton's discussion in her book as well. But she keeps writing about the particular limitations on women, not only in politics but also in terms of social and cultural messaging. Just as the tempest that came out of her comments in 1992 have long had an impact on Clinton, so, too, are the images and expectations of women as politicians. Clinton highlights the perennial dichotomy of women and men as they pursue their ambitions in any professional situation, with men always embodying confidence and capacity and women always doubting their capacities and readiness to move forward to a new position. Clinton explains that these "reactions are not innate. Men aren't naturally more confident than women. We tell them to believe in themselves, and we tell women to doubt themselves" (145).

Those narratives translate into expectations as well — we expect presidents to be strong and decisive, characteristics that are generally gendered as male. Thus, women on the campaign trail, especially running for executive office, and even more so running for the presidency, are constrained in, as Azari notes, "the double bind that Clinton has found herself in with regard to authenticity: It's like her critics want her to be grittier and more forceful, but then that's unfeminine and thus abrasive, so that won't work either" (Azari 2015). Female candidates for president (or governor) have to be both feminine

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and unfeminine simultaneously. They also need to keep their emotions calm and measured since this is another facet of their authentic selves that must hew to gendered standards so as not to descend into stereotypes.[2]

Clinton's entire chapter on being a woman in politics is substantively about constraint. It is about how she needed to learn to constrain herself when her husband ran for office — by changing her last name, by shifting the way she replied to questions, and by constructing a political self that promoted and advocated for policies and outcomes about which she was passionate but in a measured, acceptable way. Clinton's frustration is clear in her discussion of the various ways in which she found herself in a bind: how to be herself, how to run as a woman (a consideration over which she had no choice) for a position that had been held by 44 men, 43 of whom had been white. Her thoughts on being a woman in politics highlight essentially a lack of freedom, which is not unfamiliar to many women, many people of color, and many variously abled people in the United States. Social, political, and cultural expectations that define white, male, and able as the norm define the world in which those who are not white, male, and able as less free, and more constrained, and Clinton's experience on the campaign trail, as she has reflected on it, delves into the reality of these constraints.

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2. See Congresswoman Pat Schroeder's tears on the campaign trail in 1987 as the preeminent example of what a woman could not do when running for president, bookended by Clinton's own emotional demonstration in New Hampshire in 2008. Clinton notes in her book that in New Hampshire, she "didn't even cry, not really…my eyes glistened for a moment and my voice quavered for about one sentence" (123). Generally, since Senator Ed Muskie's 1972 tearful speech in New Hampshire, which contributed to the demise of his presidential campaign, when contemporary male politicians publicly cry, it is a demonstration of authenticity — their authentic emotional response to something — whereas if a woman cries, she is emotional and hysterical, which might be authentic as well, but invariably signals weakness.

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