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American Political Culture and Sarah Palin: Motherhood, Femininity, and Masculinity in the 2008 Presidential Election

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Abstract: Sarah Palin's Vice-Presidential run can be characterized by displays of motherhood, femininity, and masculinity, themes that reflect changes in American political culture as well as stationary expectations. Palin was praised and criticized for her role as a mother, indicating a shift in political culture that allows women to hold both public and private roles but not without being acceptably successful in both areas. Palin's performance of traditional femininity and masculinity signifies that women's political success is contingent on the confirmation and operation of traditional gender expectations such as motherhood and deference to husbands. She both reaffirmed and challenged gender stereotypes, embracing feminine expectations as well as playing into the macho political competition. This indicates that women in politics have not yet escaped the expectations of traditional femininity but are expected to exert masculine attributes in order to gain viable audiences in the way Palin did.

In the 2008 election, Republican presidential nominee John McCain announced Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate, the 2nd woman ever nominated for Vice President of a major political party. As a divisive figure, a fundamentalist, and mother of five, Palin's involvement in the election is certainly a notable chapter in 21st century American political history. Her role in the campaign demonstrates many interconnecting aspects of political culture as her presence assembled issues of motherhood, masculinity, and femininity. By examining the convergence of these aspects in her Vice Presidential campaign, we can answer the question of how American political culture contributed to the image and experience of Sarah Palin in the 2008 election, both her rise as a conservative star and eventual decline as an unknowledgeable newcomer. We will see that by embracing her mothering role and emphasizing both a feminine and masculine identity,

Palin is able to project a comforting femininity without sacrificing conservative individualism and traditional family values. This action however was not strong enough to offset her political inexperience, an asset that at the time was a valued characteristic of political candidates.

Early political years

In the small town of Wasilla, Alaska, young Sarah Palin was a star basketball player while also competing in beauty pageants (Thornburgh). With a father who taught her to be an expert fisherman and encouraged a “just as good as the boys” mentality, she frequently hunted moose and caribou, often gutting the animals herself (Bartholet; Thornburgh). After receiving her Bachelor’s in journalism at the University of Idaho, Sarah slowly eased her way into political participation by way of PTA meetings, to a seat on the city council, and in 1996 she became mayor of Wasilla (Thornburgh). In 2006, Palin ran for the 9th governor of Alaska at a time where the new hot issue was corruption and cronyism. Running on a “clean government” campaign, she became the state’s first female and youngest governor at 42 years old (Siegel; Bartholet).

McCain’s Pick

On September 3rd 2008, Republican presidential nominee John McCain announced Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate at the Republican National Convention (Larson & Porpora 761). In American political culture, the idea of a woman Republican is already contentious. It is thought that because women are more caring and warm they are more inclined to lean Democrat, and in political positions, there are few Republican women (Thomsen 299). In 2013, only 19 out of 232 Republicans serving in the House of Representatives were women (Thomsen 301). Studies have shown that this disparity might be due to ideological consistency. Historically, Republican women in the congressional pipeline have been to the left of their male co-partisans; 22% of female Republican state legislators identify as liberal, slightly liberal, or middle of the road,

compared to only 8% of male Republicans (Thomsen 302). Republican leaders are more likely to recruit candidates that are most ideologically in line with the party, therefore being a moderate reduces a Republican woman's success (Thomsen 304). Women who succeed in Republican positions are typically very ideologically conservative. This shows us that ideological consistency is extremely important in winning over voters, and partisanship is inherent to American Political culture. Palin made no question about her party allegiance with intense ideologically conservative pleas, which contributed to her popularity as a conservative candidate, but her gender also had an impact on her experience on the campaign trail in numerous ways.

Palin's gender was certainly not lost on the public, or on McCain. A McCain senior advisor admitted that Palin's nomination was partially an attempt to attract women voters who were upset they didn't get the chance to vote for Hillary Clinton (Larson & Porpora 764). A woman on the ticket offered the Republican party a fresh face. In her tailored suits and high heels, Palin radiated youthfulness, attractiveness, charisma, and femininity (Beail 2). Something McCain and his aides didn't predict was Palin's ability to divide women and create debates on the current state of gender politics. Feminists charged her anti-abortion stances as being harmful to women and stay at home moms praised her mothering nature (Bradley & Wicks 811). With more liberal women understanding choice to be an important aspect of feminism, they didn't interpret her traditional values as friendly to women's rights. Not every female candidate will represent female voters values, and Palin is no different. Gender roles were brought to the forefront as a staunch conservative woman had a successful career in the public sphere while also tending to five children at home. In fact, Palin's role as a mother had many implications on her experience as a political candidate, receiving praise and as well as scrutiny from women.

Palin As a Mother: Romanticizing Motherhood

There is no doubt that Palin cultivated and romanticized her motherhood role; from the moment she stepped out onto the convention stage she made it clear that she was a mom who puts her children first and simply “wants to do what is best for my children and my country”. This made her appear humble, pursuing public office not to climb the political ladder, but to ensure a better community for her children. She cradled her infant son in her arms at political events and described him as “perfectly beautiful” which read as evidence of her own unconditional love as a nurturing mother, lending praise to traditional feminine virtue (Larson & Porpora 767). She asked the public to understand her as “just your average hockey mom” with beginnings in the PTA, representing working women and their gendered views and experiences (Beail 4). She was not pursuing self-interests in the public arena, it seemed, she was still performing domestic expectations by being a nurturing and sentimental mother (McCabe, *Tea with Mother* 74). She also expressed her mothering role as a source of her political strength, describing parenting as a “training ground” for politics (Larson & Porpora 773). She said that “we [mothers] can tell when things are off-base, off-course, or not right...we’re not afraid to roll up our sleeves and get to work and get the job done and set things straight. Moms can be counted on to fight for their children’s future” (Palin 27). With this she contended that moms are distinctly political because of their role, making them (and Palin) critical assets in the political realm. Palin appeared authentic and gave many voters a sense that she was one of them and not like other politicians, appealing to an anti-elite sentiment present in conservatism; she was a western woman who is also a mom while knowing how to gut a moose (McGinley 710; Bartholet). She’s not just another politician who happens to have kids, she’s a strong tough politician because of her motherhood and her gender. Motherhood served as one of her political tactics in the American political system, attempting to garner sympathy and construct an identity as a tough yet caring mother. With her role as a mom. Palin constructed a unique identity of

authenticity and relatability, two aspects of a candidate significant to voters in American political culture.

Mothers in Politics

Palin's conservative strand of motherhood can be traced as far back as mid-nineteenth century turn where women were "defenders of the home and hearth"; women would protect traditional values, but they should not interfere with the developments of prosperity and power (McCabe, *Tea with Mother* 78). Palin's rise taps back into the idea that women have a higher social capacity due to their essential nature, but instead of not interfering with American prosperity, they should be immensely involved. With anti-abortion, pro-gun, creationism, and anti-gay marriage stances, Palin's campaign was defining a particular "moral prowess", exemplifying religious faith and temperance also practiced by early suffragists (McCabe, *Tea with Mother* 86). She espoused the conservative "culture war" value-based strategy, aided in her essentialist female credentials. Before 2008, motherhood and politics were seen as incompatible. It was certainly still unusual for Palin to be a mother of young children in such a prominent political role (Beail 20). Yet, the newness of such a concept allowed Palin to construct an original and distinct character surrounding her motherhood and celebrating it as a forceful political identity.

Debates on Palin's Motherhood

Through her own design, Sarah Palin's role as a mother was a central feature of her campaign, leaving her vulnerable to the numerous criticisms and opinions brought up in online discussions. Some saw Palin as an accomplished working mother, projecting to the world that women can do anything (Beail 13). There was a palpable sense of relief that finally there was a new type of woman in politics, not a meek stay-at-home wife or angry conflicted women (McCabe, *States of Confusion*). She resonated with working moms who rely on "moxie" to get through each

day of working motherhood (McCabe, *States of Confusion* 151). Conservatives used to hate the notion of a woman who can do it all, but Palin was praised for providing “a model for how some women can manage motherhood and a professional career” (Schreiber 2). She energized conservative supermoms: women who manage to balance work and family responsibilities while being a public advocate for conservative political causes (Schreiber 4). Women were purportedly mobilized by Palin’s can-do attitude and embraced her hockey-mom label (Beail 20). When the media spoke of Sarah Palin, it seemed to always be connected to her gender, her fertility, her pro-life stance, and her ability to balance motherhood with politics. These were not always negative reports; they were critical aspects of her character that contribute to her appeal. It seems that in the wake of Palin, social conservatives began to say “how dare you suggest a woman can’t be a mom and take on a high-powered career?” (Miller & Peake 490). Typical wisdom about the way women think and vote was overturned as Republican women who typically refuse to vote for mothers of small children defended the right of Palin to return to work three days after giving birth to her son Trig (Miller & Peake 491). The fact that Palin received sympathy and praise regarding her motherhood is an indication that political culture in 2008 accepted mothers as capable political figures more so than in the past (Beail 20).

While she did receive much admiration, she did not avoid criticism on her mothering style or fear from feminist women. Some worried that her popularity would perpetuate the notion that all women are capable of being mothers and career women, so capable in fact that there is no need for parental leave or employer support for breastfeeding. Any mother who can’t do it all on their own is simply lazy, undermining the need for social support for working mother (McCarver 24). She appeared to achieve the balance of career and family that many women strive for without looking exhausted, making women feel inadequate. There exists the thought that a woman’s image is somehow tainted if their only role is in the home (Miller & Peake 500). Palin’s candidacy solidified

the conservative notion that families and mothers must be individually capable without the help of employers or government, evident in the face that she never proposed policies to help women with their family duties (Ford). This led many to fear Palin's success, creating a new expectation for success among women who must be able to do it all.

While some thought her success put mothers in a difficult place, many questioned her capabilities as a mother of five and Vice President to begin with (McCarver 27). Her parenting became the target of intense judgement when the media learned that Palin's 17 year-old daughter Bristol, an unmarried high school student, was pregnant. Suddenly many were debating whether or not she was in fact a successful mom, one writer saying "I guess Palin officially failed as executive of her own household" (McCarver 22). Could she actually be Vice President and still take care of her kids? Was her daughter's pregnancy proof that she was a neglectful mother? (Beail 5). Many people didn't think so, indicating that much of the public (including women) judged political mothers on their ability to succeed in both roles without any mistakes.

In American political culture, being a mother and a politician is imbued with meaning. Whether the public sees motherhood as a positive trait or negative trait is inconsistent, evident by both the admiration and scrutiny Palin received. But her motherhood role clearly impacted her political experience, unable to avoid conversations regarding her mothering capabilities and what her performance means for other women. Political mothers seem to be graded on whether or not they are able to juggle both the private and public sphere, and such ability reflects on their character as a politician. Palin exploited what has long been a burden on women in executive office, to prove that they will not be hindered by domestic responsibilities. To some (but not all) she actually modeled the idea that being a mother is not a liability but a qualification for office: one of the greatest credentials of all (Miller & Peake 499).

Politicians See Mothers Differently

Much of these contentions regarding political motherhood stem from conventional wisdom in American political culture that mothers are different from nonmothers. There is the suggestion that women with children have different political priorities, concerns, and positions on political issues, assuming that parenthood acts as an agent of socialization influencing one's values (Greenlee 3). Typically, Republicans like to think that parents are a distinctively conservative group on cultural values issues such as abortion and gay marriage (Bradley & Wicks 818). However, studies seem to disagree on whether or not motherhood correlates with conservative or liberal values (Greenlee 6). This doesn't stop conservative groups from attempting to appeal to moms. Beginning in the 1996 presidential race, the "soccer mom" demographic was identified as an important swing vote in American elections. Soccer moms were defined as tend to be white, married, middle-class suburban women with school-age children with their lives and politics ultimately tied to their children (Beail 7). In 2008, Palin lead an appeal to hockey moms who are similar to soccer moms, except they are more competitive and aggressive (Beail 11). The media has used such parental based for many electoral cycles labels (including "security moms" after 9/11), but 2008 was the first time one of the party's members used these terms themselves (Beail 12), indicating that in 2008 the American political culture endorsed the marketing of motherhood to a defined group of women, giving Palin an advantage in appealing to a specific group as she embraced her hockey mom label.

The Masculinity and Femininity of Sarah Palin

Palin knew her gender was an asset that gave her a critical edge. Instead of hiding her gender she emphasized it with designer jackets, tight pencil skirts, high heels, and a feminine upsweep hair-do. She was the beauty queen with the giant smile and maintained her presence as

something far from the conventional male politician: a fresh unapologetic woman with a heart (Miller & Peake 489). It is typically thought in today's political culture that political women face a no-win situation: they are either too warm and incompetent, or competent but too masculine (Bradley & Wicks 808). In this way, it is believed that women in the political sphere must choose which slant they want to take. Hillary Clinton notably distanced herself from her feminine side in order to compensate for being a woman in a masculine job. People considered her to be competent, but not likeable. As evident from her life before the 2008 election, Palin took on both masculine and feminine traits, with her moose slaying rugged background in the Alaskan frontier and becoming a mother of five after marrying her High School sweetheart. This combination of the feminine and masculine is perhaps best exemplified in Palin's own joke made at her convention speech: "you know the difference between a hockey mom and a Pitbull? Lipstick". She claimed that she is not a stuck up woman, she is tenacious, tough, and down to earth, all while embracing her womanhood as a lipstick wearing mother (Beail 15). This moment caused many to believe Palin was the new face of conservative feminism. With articles titled "A Feminist Dream at the GOP", some journalists professed Palin to have created "a brand-new style of muscular American feminism" (Powers). She did not believe women are victims of gender oppression; women have every opportunity that a man has and they must engage their frontierswomen sensibilities and work hard to bring themselves to success, once again espousing her individualistic and ultimately masculine nature (McCabe, States of Confusion 150).

Palin as Feminine

One might ask why her professional political position doesn't strip her of her traditional feminine role. This is because motherhood establishes her femininity undisputedly (Larson & Porpora 768). She emphasized her role as mother and wife, placing her family front and center and

making comments about her husband as being her “guy”, further romanticizing her role as a wife (McGinley 713). She acted as the supportive wife in praise of her running mate, John McCain, sealing her image under the bounds of marriage, motherhood, and family in order to add to a conservative representation of a woman as a fertile and faithful body (McCabe, *Tea with Mother* 88). Because she was a mother, she was viewed as a real woman, and for even the most conservative followers, Palin’s maternity seemed to counterbalance her public career – a traditionally masculine characteristic (Larson & Porpora 768). In 2008 it was understood that in such an unpredictable economy, women must work. This reduced conflict between her traditional gender roles and involvement in national politics as even male-led socially conservative groups shifted their rhetoric about gender roles to reflect these economic changes. Women were entering the workforce in record numbers, and traditional Republican motherhood in which women serve on the sidelines is clearly obsolete. Today instead, we see a new kind of Republican motherhood emerging, one in which mothers must be mothers first, but can still be political (Schreiber 6). Social conservatism was premised on theological beliefs about the need for male leadership in (heterosexual) families, and gendered values about the primacy of women as caretakers (Schreiber 8). Social conservatives believe that women should still prioritize their roles as mothers, but women are no longer bound exclusively to the home since it is no longer economically viable. Palin’s identity manifested under the notion that as long as women prioritize the family, they can have successful careers (Schreiber 7).

Additionally, being pro-life signaled her commitment to traditional family/gender roles in the private home. It was widely known that she had chosen to proceed with her fifth pregnancy after discovering her child had Down syndrome, a discovery that in eight of ten cases leads parents to opt for abortion (Lilla). This made her a pro-life icon, speaking on the pregnancy as a gift from God. Her pregnancy and refusal to abort was a strong qualification to be the nation’s morality queen.

Even if gender roles are now more flexible in the public sphere (evident in her ability to hold a high-profile job), Palin still appreciated women's essential reproductive nature and respects motherhood above all else (Beail 11). Palin found a way to make the pro-life stance feminist by criticizing pro-choice advocates who tell women that children are a burden to success; "some feminist groups try to tell [pregnant women] that they're not capable of doing both [succeeding in a career and being a parent]. We're sending young women the message that 'you can keep your child life and still pursue career or education. You're not strong enough; you're not capable'" (Palin 30). The message that confident women are able to accomplish anything made Palin's brand of pro-life feminism attractive to many American women who see Palin as an undeniable woman of strength and character that gives dignity to the role of motherhood (Ford 3).

It makes sense that Palin would appeal to this traditional view of women as a wife and mother, seeing that the Republican party professed gender traditionalism and women's significant role in the private sphere as naturally derived (Sharrow et al.). Conservatives urge political leaders to think of the family in private terms constructed of a heterosexual marriage with the woman as the primary caretaker of the household (Schreiber 7). The importance of traditional family roles in the Republican party is a prevalent aspect in American political culture. While many women encourage the public to value women in the public sphere, Palin asserted that women can be valued both in their public and private capacities (Ford 4). Palin embraced such media coverage of her gender and family status, wanting to be identified with the private sphere as well as the public (Miller & Peake 504). Palin's image as a mother had formidable power; her maternal identity gave her credentials as a true conservative who respected traditional family values, a necessity for acceptance into traditional conservatism (McCabe, *Tea with Mother* 87).

Palin As Masculine

In her convention speech Palin also exemplified her celebration of masculinity and subjugation of the feminine which would garner her support from conservative audiences (Gibson et al. 251). She adopted a tough, masculine style, berating Barack Obama by talking about his “community organizing” in a disparaging and condescending manner (McGinley 722). She attacked Obama’s perceived femininity by also pointing to McCain’s military credentials that qualify him as masculine, noting that only one man in the election has truly fought for the American people (Gibson et al. 250). This reaffirmed the notion that real men are warriors who use physical force and engage in military service, while simultaneously implying that a lack of service is a feminine weakness carried by Obama. She emasculated Obama as a talker rather than a doer and celebrated McCain’s “sheer guts”, praising his individualistic cowboy-esque persona that Palin has learned to appreciate from her Alaskan upbringing (Gibson et al. 249). Like McCain, Palin identified herself as a maverick, a lone-gun that is not submissive to the elite Washington power structure. This resentment of cooperation seems to undermine traditional feminine traits such as community and interconnectedness. Finally, she emphasized her toughness by reminding everyone of her past experience “fighting to bring about the largest private-sector infrastructure project in North American history” (Gibson et al. 252). Palin’s own work as governor illustrated the competitive and action-centered behavior that characterizes masculine politics (Gibson et al. 253). Palin undermined the feminine just enough to maintain the “femophobia” embedded in political discourse that allowed her masculine side to succeed in a conservative context (Gibson et al. 254).

Did this tactic of expressing both feminine and masculine traits help Palin? A study on perceptions of Palin showed that exposure to media treatments that contained a mixture of feminine and masculine qualities marginally boosted perceptions of her charisma (Eberhardt & Merolla 120). She was able to negotiate an identity that included both the masculine and feminine to please her audience, a tactic that drew massive attention. The polls tell a story of success as well. Rasmussen

Reports noted that just after the Republican National Convention in the first week of September 2008 Palin's RNC speech generated a phenomenal response, making her more popular than either Obama or McCain (Greenlee 1). A Newsweek cover story on Palin claimed that white women began shifting toward the Republican ticket once she was nominated (53% in support, up from 44% in July), with one in three white women saying they were more likely to vote for McCain because of his Vice-Presidential pick (Beail 21) This shift was startling proof that the Palin pick had appeal beyond the defined social conservatives and value voters of the Republican base (Siegel).

I argue that if Palin declared conservative policies and values but ignored her family and did not give in to traditional gender roles of wifedom and mothering, then she would have been seen as too masculine and not have gained as much support as she did. By employing both masculine and feminine characteristics, Palin was able to project femininity without sacrificing conservative individualism, masculinity, and traditional family values. This combination of the traditional and the feminine suggests that in 2008 American political culture a woman may be accepted into the political sphere, as long as she maintained a respect for traditional gender roles and can perform a masculine cold-hearted identity in the political system when necessary. Palin broke down barriers for women by being the 2nd female Vice Presidential nominee for a major political party, yet she reaffirms gender stereotypes and the idea that one must defer to traditional roles in the home while maintaining masculinity in the political sphere, suggesting that masculinity is a required trait of any political being (Beail 21). She desired to break the glass ceiling, but never at the expense of the family. Women have not yet escaped the expectations of traditional femininity; certainly, women can seek professional positions of power, yet they must still maintain their femininity through looks, and motherhood (Schreiber 9). In American political culture, women play to the masculine nature of politics while also preserving a traditional feminine. Palin understood this need to play both roles, a plan that led to her acceptance and popularity in the political realm.

Decline and Conclusion

Palin's biggest downfall was her inexperience and unpreparedness for the role of Vice President. In interviews she was unable to offer coherent answers about the Federal Reserve or regulatory reform. Many argued that as governor of a lightly populated state for less than two years, she was not ready to step into the presidency (Schreiber 10; Siegel). If Palin's failed candidacy demonstrates anything about American political culture in 2008, it's that the use of both masculine and feminine traits was not enough to quell voters' desire for someone with a significant career in politics as well as knowledge about the system. The country expected the same standards of knowledge, competence, and experience from Palin as any other male candidate (McGinley 717). Experience is another important thing that we ask of our political leaders in this political culture. A fan of hers or not, one cannot deny that in the 2008 election Sarah Palin crafted a meticulous image that garnered her much support from conservatives. The nature of American political culture gave Palin the opportunity to exploit an openness to mothers as politicians that allowed her to highlight her motherhood as a source of strength, morality, and authenticity. Her praise and criticism for her motherhood indicates that while women have more flexibility in the public sphere, in our political culture mother politicians are still expected to successfully handle both private and public roles without sacrificing either. In portraying both traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine, Palin's performance signifies that women's political success is contingent on the confirmation and operation of gender expectations, such that the political sphere is dominated by masculinity, and political women must convey conventional femininity in some way. Ultimately, Palin's attention to and exercise of the attitudes, beliefs, and values that give order to the American political system wasn't enough to outweigh her political inexperience.

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