



Feminism informs Hillary Clinton's personal story and influences her policies, but only to a degree. Reuters/Mark Makela

Hillary Clinton and Julia Gillard: how the media shape our view of leaders as 'women'

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During the 2016 Democratic National Convention, Julia Gillard, prime minister of Australia between 2010 and 2013, wrote an open letter to Hillary Clinton in *The New York Times*. She conceded:

I'm not egotistical enough to think that the most qualified and prepared presidential candidate the United States has ever seen needs my advice on policy.

... But even someone of her vast experience has been buffeted by what I call the "curious question of gender". She knows what it's like to be the subject of the stereotype that a powerful woman cannot be likeable, that if she is commanding then she must be incapable of empathy.

Gillard is well placed to offer such advice. She experienced an unprecedented level of sexism as Australia's first female prime minister.

Clinton admired Gillard for her famous 2012 “sexism and misogyny” speech. And Gillard has repeatedly encouraged Clinton to combat sexism on the campaign trail, early and with vigour.

Julia Gillard's 2012 'sexism and misogyny' speech.

But, just as Australian journalists derided Gillard for supposedly “playing the gender card”, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has accused Clinton – his opponent in November – of playing the “woman’s card”.

This can be contextualised in terms of the feminist theory of post-feminism. When male politicians speak of women in such ways, they normalise masculinity while foregrounding the supposed insignificance of gender. This renders gender absolutely central to political debate.

Post-feminism and the media

Post-feminism, according to cultural theorist Angela McRobbie, is “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined” at the same time as appearing engaged in “a well-informed and even well-intentioned response to feminism”.

Celebration of the achievements of women and girls in the mainstream media may suggest equality has been achieved. Simultaneously, ambivalence and even repudiation is publicly levelled toward women who transgress often unspoken assumptions about gender.

My research into media representations of Gillard during her prime ministership argued:

While post-feminist media assumes women’s “equality”, it concurrently presented Gillard as an aberrant political body because of her femaleness.

Several studies about Clinton point to the influence of post-feminism. Her 1990s television appearances as first lady, as well as the digital age phenomena of the “Texts from Hillary” memes and #tweetsfromhillary hashtag, have been interpreted through this lens.

During Clinton’s 2000 New York Senate campaign, television media exhibited “a mixture of respect and disdain” for her. Journalists’ tendency to approach women candidates as “neoliberal, post-feminist subjects” not only normalises whiteness and class privilege, it also relies on an assumed gender dichotomy between the public and private spheres.

However, Clinton’s political success has been partially due to a willingness to conform to certain journalistic expectations about gender.

Communications scholar Ashli Quesinberry Stokes also situates post-feminism as a “significant rhetorical obstacle” in Clinton’s 2008 presidential campaign. Gender and post-feminist media coverage, Stokes argues, greatly influenced the Democrats to nominate Barack Obama for president in 2008.

But even Obama is not immune to related media discourses. Journalists have repeatedly interpreted his presidency in terms of the theory of post-racialism.

Historian Peniel Joseph writes:

[Obama’s 2008] victory was heralded as the arrival of a “post-racial” America, one in which the nation’s original sin of racial slavery and [...] discrimination had finally been absolved by the election of a black man as commander in chief. For a while, the nation basked in a racially harmonious afterglow.

Yet this has not proven to be the case. While Obama may proclaim himself to be “what a feminist looks like”, the question of whether black lives matter still remains in the Obama era.

Clinton’s key international role as secretary of state provides more parallels with Gillard’s experiences. The focus on fashion levelled at Gillard, even from controversial Australian feminist and “unruly woman” Germaine Greer, echoes the controversy surrounding Clinton’s hair scrunchies.

A post-feminist worldview enables vicious gendered insults to flourish, often in the guise of “jokes”, in the media and beyond. The infamous “Julia Gillard Kentucky Fried Quail” menu from a 2013 Liberal Party fundraiser was later followed by “KFC Hillary Special” buttons, sold at Republican events and Trump rallies.

Australia's very own Burger Urge released The Donald Trump burger in April 2016. While it could be said to be similarly offensive, in reality, it is controversial without being sexist.

The recently released Mrs Clinton's Chipotle Chicken, however, repeatedly emphasises her gender. It lingers on her marital status – Mrs Clinton loves Bill; the burger features “Bill's scandalous special sauce” – and pictures her in an apron.

Often, through both approbation and outrage, these sexist representations of female politicians gain more attention and circulation in the media than the substance of their policies.

Post-feminist feminist leaders?

The initiation of women and people of colour into the political class does not necessarily result in feminist and anti-racist victories. Nonetheless, post-feminist media responses to female politicians complicate their ability to engage with their constituencies.

And yet, Clinton's personal story, as shared in a documentary produced for the 2016 convention, evokes feminist elements. Her legal advocacy on behalf of women and children, her famous 1995 “women's rights are human rights” speech and her stance on equal pay are informed by the tenets of feminism.

Hillary Clinton's 1995 'women's rights are human rights' speech.

Even so, Clinton's election as president would not necessarily be a “feminist coup”. Gillard's stance on different issues is similarly contradictory. Her contribution to Australia's refugee policy essentially abandoned feminist principles, whereas her advocacy of girls' education embraces them.

Women leaders should not have to experience being publicly lambasted on account of their gender – a process enabled and perpetuated by a post-feminist media cycle. However, even when elected, women who rhetorically engage with feminism do not always promote feminist or woman-friendly policies that disrupt capitalism and benefit racial minorities and other vulnerable populations.