

Review - Framing Sarah Palin

Written by Diana B. Carlin

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DIANA B. CARLIN, APR 22 2013

Framing Sarah Palin: Pit Bulls, Puritans, and Politics

By: Linda Beail and Rhonda Kinney Longworth

New York: Routledge, 2013



The 2008 United States presidential election will be remembered for its historic context—election of the first African-American president, the first serious woman candidate for a presidential nomination, and the first Republican woman vice-presidential nominee. The election also provides numerous and rich avenues for research and analysis by scholars from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives. Perhaps one of the most interesting facets to analyze is the communication of and about the two distinctly different women candidates—Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin. Their stories provide neither a clear set of theories by which to evaluate their successes and failures nor guidelines for future women candidates to follow.

It is doubtful that Hollywood or even *Saturday Night Live* could have created two characters as different but equally enigmatic as Clinton and Palin. Political scientists Linda Beail and Rhonda Kinney Longworth take on the lesser-known and researched but no less polarizing and complex Palin in their book. Drawing on psycholinguistic, media, and rhetorical theories of framing, schema, metaphor, and narrative, they seek to explain why Palin “ignite[s] such passionate loyalty—and such loathing” while also exploring more about “the state of American politics, and about the status of American women in politics, in particular” (1). Their analysis is based on an extensive collection of media commentary and news reports from multiple perspectives, blogs, political cartoons, photos, and Palin’s self-

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descriptions via speeches and interviews. They summarize other studies of Palin and women candidates and effectively position the distinctive qualities of their interdisciplinary approach.

Frames and Narratives: Theory and Application

The concept of framing suggests that language involves more than denotative or dictionary meanings. Words or phrases are interpreted or perceived through an individual's conceptual framework. In a political context, frames are influenced by history, culture, and partisanship. George Lakoff and Elisabeth Wehling explain that "Framing is (or should be) about moral values, deep truths, and the policies that flow from them." How an issue is framed within political discourse can influence vote choice and policy outcomes. Consider the use of the term "Obamacare" in the health care debate to better understand the power of frames.

Because Palin's selection as John McCain's running mate was not anticipated, it was important to create narratives that introduced her to the public, solidified the party's conservative base, invited women to take a look at the ticket, and created excitement to produce a "game change." Thus, the authors' use of framing to analyze Palin is appropriate and insightful. The book's title obviously refers to the theory employed; however, the term "framing" also infers that someone is being unfairly incriminated or judged. By the book's conclusion, an answer to whether or not negative reactions to the narratives—especially those related to Palin and feminism—were fair or accurate remains the reader's purview to interpret. In presenting the frames in a balanced manner, the authors tap into the reader's constructs and make the book one that can be read and discussed by individuals on either side of the political divide. As an academic, I see the book's potential to provide lively discussion that puts neither side of a frame's interpretation at a natural disadvantage and may even promote some degree of understanding of both the power of political language and the bases for our differences.

Two variables related to political campaign communication provide criteria for the selected frames and the book's organization: partisanship and gender. Republican narratives were an important part of the Palin story to mobilize the base that had problems with McCain. The authors note that the "frontier woman" and the "political outsider" frames were consistent with those of past Republican male candidates, especially Ronald Reagan. As the first woman on a Republican ticket, Palin's gendered frames were inevitable. They include Palin's self-described "hockey mom," "beauty queen" (which resulted from her days as a pageant contestant and her attractiveness) and "post-feminist role model or victim of sexism?" which summarizes the double-binds of women candidates. The authors' stated goal in selecting and analyzing these frames was not to conduct a traditional political science investigation of either the origins of frames or their impacts on public opinion but rather to determine how the five frames "shape[d] public response to her and contribute[d] to wider public debates around partisanship, faith, populism, and feminism" (8). Through a thorough examination of both positive and negative reactions to the frames, the authors did succeed in providing insights into the current deep political divide in U.S. politics. For example, the story of "an everywoman" who balances family demands with those of a powerful position could be viewed as a tribute to the success of feminism and a woman's ability to have and do it all or it serves as a critique of a post-feminist return to and glorification of traditional roles that hold women back. It could also serve as a reason to vote for someone who knows the challenges of American families or it could stand as proof of a set of life experiences lacking in preparation for the number two job in the country. Throughout the book's analysis, the authors demonstrate the complexity of weaving multiple frames into a narrative that are intended for different audiences but are interrelated and can diminish the narrative's overall effectiveness.

Contributions to Gender and Politics Studies

One of the most significant contributions of the book's analysis of the Palin frames was the use of historical antecedents to demonstrate a theme's prevalence such as the frontier man or woman within American history and culture and its impact on the Republican Party. A second piece of historical context that is important to the book's development is the tension between the public and private spheres that women have navigated since the first wave of feminism in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Women secured legislation that promoted equality or protected their rights and eventually gained the vote because they demonstrated the connection between the personal and the political. Having that context helps readers understand the challenges women candidates face in balancing feminine

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attributes that distinguish them from men in terms of leadership style and a perceived higher sense of ethics with being seen as too feminine or weak to govern and concerned with only women's issues. The tension also contributes effectively to the authors' exploration of the relationship among religion, social issues, and public policies that form clear partisan divides. The authors state a desire to provide lessons from Palin's use of frames for other women candidates, but Palin's unique position as a vice presidential candidate and her personal and professional resume preclude such insights except as they relate to the common double binds that women candidates face. What Palin's story does contribute to the ongoing study of women in politics is the importance of personal choice of narratives. As a study my colleague Kelly Winfrey and I conducted of media coverage of Clinton and Palin demonstrated, stereotypes of women candidates that diminish their credibility or perceptions of competence may result from the candidates' own choices. Beail and Longworth's final chapter reinforces that lesson and it may be the most important one for future women candidates.

A final value of the study of Sarah Palin and the narratives she and others spun is related to the nature of campaigns. The authors cite Palin's decision to leave office in 2009 as an indication of her enthusiasm to campaign or engage in the "game" of politics but of her lack of interest in governing. They also cite research that vice presidential choices are often made with the election rather than governing in mind, and McCain's choice of Palin and the narratives by and about her support that conclusion. This part of the analysis further supports the authors' desired goal of providing insight into contemporary American politics. For example, the outsider frame works well when no one likes what is going on in Washington, but it makes it difficult if not impossible to demonstrate the ability to work within the system if elected. The beauty queen or attractiveness frame may reduce the image of a woman as a strident, emasculating feminist and make a candidate less threatening to some voters and even more appealing to some conservatives. However, that frame ties into what Kathleen Hall Jamieson referred to as the womb/brain double bind and creates doubts about a woman's ability to fulfill the Commander-in-Chief role. If there is need for more analysis of "what it all means" for future women candidates, it is the lack of a construct within the public consciousness of either party or gender that enables us to see a woman in the Commander-in-Chief role. The authors provide less analysis of Palin's lack of foreign policy experience vis-à-vis the frames than of other aspects of what makes a competent leader.

Overall, *Framing Sarah Palin* is a book that provides insights into the intersection of gender and partisan American politics that scholars from many disciplines can further explore. It does identify for women interested in running for office the importance of narratives and their potential pitfalls even if it cannot provide a clear set of "rules" for what does and does not work. For both U.S. and international readers trying to better understand the current state of American politics, the historical and cultural context that underlies much of the book's analysis is important in knowing how we arrived at the current state and why it is so difficult to bridge the divide.

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