

The Gendered Senate: National Politics and Gender Imagery after the Thomas Hearings

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In the months leading up the 1992 national elections, the campaign working to elect Carol Mosely Braun to the Senate from Illinois sent out a mass mailing to solicit contributions. A key paragraph of the letter, emphasized with various degrees of underlining, italics, and boldface, read:

Last fall, the best kept secret in Washington was exposed. The hearings on the Clarence Thomas nomination gave us all a rude awakening. Of the 100 members of the United States Senate, the most important legislative body in the country, 98 are men. Women constitute only 2% of these decision-makers.¹

Though it was produced in a determinedly partisan context, this is perhaps the most succinct statement of a key political impact of the Hill/Thomas hearings. When the news of Anita Hill's accusation against Clarence Thomas first broke, the public reacted not only to the shocking nature of the allegations, but also to the shocking indifference of the Senate Judiciary Committee which had not deemed them worthy of further investigation. Only men served on the committee, as reporters were quick to point out: men who did not see the relevance or the importance of the accusation; men who appeared out of touch with the lived realities of women in the workplace; men who "just didn't get it," in the words of the slogan repeated so often in 1991.

The televised hearings that were held in response to this reaction served to fix the visual image of the Committee as an all-male body. In subsequent weeks this initial insight was deflected, and public discourse, as reflected in talk shows and newspaper columns, came to concentrate on the narrower and perhaps ultimately unresolvable question of who was telling the truth, who committing perjury. But in the months and years since the hearings, the immediate question of truth and falsehood has faded in importance like an old headline, while the initial impact, that first reaction to the maleness of the Senate, has proved enduring. In the following pages I will briefly outline the history and the problematics of what we might call "unexamined maleness" in American politics. I will also consider the question of why the related perception of the Senate as an all-white body did not received similar attention in what is known as the mainstream media and political commentary in the United States, nor have a similar impact on the racial politics of this country. I will then look at the promise of changing gender sensibility, and perhaps of changing gender roles in politics, that the hearings seemed to hold. Finally, I will examine the degree to which that promise has been fulfilled, or to which the challenges to our gender assumptions raised by the hearings remain ahead of us, still to be taken up.

¹ Campaign brochure, received 17 September 1992.

Marked Men

From the public reaction to the Thomas/Hill hearings it did indeed seem that, as the Moseley-Braun fundraising letter put it, “the best kept secret in Washington,” a deep and dirty secret, had suddenly been brought to light. The irony, of course, was that the makeup of the Senate had never been a secret. It was an open, evident fact that 98 of the 100 U.S. senators were men. No political or media conspiracy kept the absence of women, or better stated, the omnipresence of men in national politics from public consciousness. It was rather the conformity of male omnipresence with public images of politics and politicians that kept the absence of women from becoming “a fact,” with its own, autonomous presence in the political arena. The maleness of the Senate was well known but, until the hearings, unremarked. Or, as a linguist might say, *unmarked*.

In linguistics, the “unmarked” form of a word is its most unadorned form: dog, walk, see. That basic, general form represents the word at rest, as it were; to it we add endings (and in some languages, suffixes) to indicate particular aspects of the word: the plural (dogs), the past tense (walked), the third person (sees). These changes mark the word; they denote that something about them departs from the abstract norm. In many languages, gender is linguistically marked in this way, and in European languages, as their grammars have been codified over the past five centuries, it is almost always the masculine form of a word which is considered “unmarked,” while the feminine (and sometime neuter) forms are “marked” with a different ending. Look in a Spanish, French, or Russian dictionary, for example, and you will find adjectives listed under their masculine forms, with feminine endings given as alternatives.

Unlike other European languages, modern English employs few gender markers, but those few that it does use follow the same pattern.² *Woman* is a special case of *man*; *she* of *he*. One is a female human, the other humanity in general. You can, as they say, look it up. Perhaps because gender in English, unlike the Romance and Slavic languages, refers almost exclusively to “real” or “natural” sexual differences between the masculine and the feminine (and assigns most inanimate objects to the neutral gender, “it”), English-speaking social critics have found the notion of gender useful in analyzing the sociology of sexual difference. Linguistic gender, as a function of language, is clearly a social rather than, for example, a biological category. To refer to male and female in the social world as “genders” is to use the linguistic concept of gender as a metaphor, or more precisely a metonym, for the way that sexual (that is, “natural” or “biological”) differences are given social definition, and thus act as social rather than biological categories.³ As with linguistic gender, in the social world roles are “gendered”—they have both “marked” and

² The linguistic gender markers of Anglo-Saxon were dropped in Middle English. The only general-purpose gender marker in modern English that I am aware of is the noun suffix *-ess*, adopted from middle French, which significantly is used mainly to indicate occupation. Compare the images associated with each term in the pairs actor/actress, steward/stewardess, waiter/waitress, poet/poetess, and so on.

³ This definition of “gender” has become so commonplace, yet so little understood, in American English over the past two decades that it is now frequently used as a euphemism for “sex,” obviating the vital distinction between social and biological categories. For a clear presentation of the relation between the linguistic and the social concepts of “gender” see Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 4-5, where she notes that comparable notions do not exist in the Romance languages.

“unmarked” gender categories. In fact, in the social world this concept of markedness can be expanded to other social categories which, like gender, are based on socially defined “biological” differences, primary among which is the social category of race.⁴

To return to national politics, the standardized icon for “Senator” in American political cartoons is a white-haired white man in a dark suit. One could argue that this is simply a reflection of reality, but the key point is that in these cartoons the “maleness” of the Senator does not stand out; his “whiteness,” even less.⁵ These are unmarked qualities. The same point can be made statistically: of 10,090 newspaper headlines dealing in one way or another with “politics” in 1992, as listed in the National Newspapers Index, it is significant that only 236 mentioned the words *politics* and *women* in the same breath. It is even more significant, however, that only 20 mentioned both *politics* and *men*—in spite of the fact that the overwhelming majority of politicians in the United States are male.⁶ To be a male (and white) as a Senator is not, in itself, a fact worthy of remark, in the way that being a woman demonstrably was, and still is.

Founding Fathers

The “unmarked” nature of the white male in national politics goes back to the very origins, to the Constitution which, you might say, engendered the Congress and the Presidency.

The authors of the Constitution made every effort to write in general terms, to search always for the most inclusive, abstract word that would convey their meaning. One effect of their self-consciously lofty writing style is a surface appearance of gender neutrality. The word *man*, for instance, never appears in the Constitution; instead, the Founding Fathers speak of *inhabitants*, *citizens*, and, their favorite word, *persons*. Representatives are not *white men* elected by a *white male* electorate, but “*members chosen... by the people of the several States.*” If the Constitution had been written yesterday, there are those who would accuse its authors of straining for political correctness. In the language of the Constitution, a Senator is not a man, but a “person” over thirty, a “*citizen*,” and “an *inhabitant* of that State for which he shall be chosen.” And

⁴ Unlike the gender and sex, there is no term for the social category of “race” to contrast with the “biological” category. It might be pointed out that such a contrast is not entirely necessary, as “race” has been discredited as a biological category since the early 1900s; yet in the popular imagination “racial” differences continue to be defined according to a folk-biological taxonomy of human beings. Some social critics have responded to this conundrum by consistently enclosing the word “race” in quotation marks, to mark its invented and metaphorical quality. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Introduction: Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *“Race,” Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 1-20; and Peter Wade, “‘Race,’ Nature, and Culture,” *Man* (n.s.) vol. 28 (1993), pp. 17-34.

⁵ I am writing here of how representations in the majority, that is, white American press are interpreted by white viewers, who take their whiteness to be invisible (and, conversely, blackness as “marked”). Theorist and critic bell hooks has written incisively about this problematic: “Usually, white students respond with naive amazement that black people critically assess white people from a standpoint where ‘whiteness’ is the privileged signifier.” bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 167.

⁶ The National Newspaper Index Database includes information about articles published in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*.

it is only through that word *he* that gender overtly enters this first description of the Senate.⁷

Although such overt invokings of gender by the Founders are rare, there is much that the Constitution leaves unsaid, but well understood. In the language of the Constitution, an all-male, all-white electorate is “the people,” and conversely all “persons” are assumed white and male, unless proven otherwise. Neither are slavery and race mentioned by name in the Constitution; but when the census was to enumerate “three-fifths of all other persons,” there was never any doubt that such “other persons” referred, unambiguously, to enslaved Africans. Nor was there any doubt that the abstract, roundabout reference to “the migration or importation of such persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit” referred quite concretely to the slave trade.

In the same way, the gender and the race of the electorate and of the elected are not mentioned in the Constitution—contrary to what one might now expect, if one is aware of the history of the struggles of disenfranchised women, Blacks, and of other racial and ethnic “minorities” to achieve suffrage. But precisely through not mentioning what was all too well understood, the Constitution both reflected and helped to enshrine a view of the lofty, the general, the abstract as white and male. As Patricia Williams has written about the “neutral” (that is, unmarked) language of the Constitution, “Blacks and women are the objects of a constitutional omission that has been incorporated into a theory of neutrality. It is thus that omission becomes a form of expression, as oxymoronic as that sounds: racial omission is a literal part of original intent; it is the fixed, reiterated prophesy of the Founding Fathers” (Williams 1991: 121).

The Hearings and the Promise of Change

The reaction to Anita Hill’s testimony and the second round of confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas seemed to many to promise a sea-change in gender politics and gender attitudes in the United States. It seemed, particularly to people concerned with feminist issues, that the undercurrent of rage provoked by hearings would, almost by itself, right the “constitutional omission” of gender, if not of race, and write women into the higher circles of national politics. A graphic cover of *Ms.* magazine printed late in 1991 emphatically headlined this attitude: “RAGE + WOMEN = POWER.” A small banner across the top of the magazine cover tied this affirmation implicitly to the hearings: “Exclusive: Anita Hill Speaks Out!”⁸ Two years later, this early perception had not been entirely dispelled; the young feminist writer Naomi Wolf predicted that “the new female power” resulting from the “rage of insulted women” at the treatment of Anita Hill before those male Senators would inevitably “change the 21st century.”⁹

⁷ *He* is used mainly to speak of the President, who is referred to by the male pronoun 26 times; *he* describes the Vice President once, and Senators or Representatives three times.

⁸ Cover art by Barbara Kruger, *Ms.* 2(4), January/February 1992. The back cover adds: “We will no longer be seen and not heard.”

⁹ Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (New York: Random House, 1993).

The bright primary colors of this reaction to the hearings—rage at the male Senate, energetic enthusiasm for the possibilities of change unleashed by that rage—were less evident among other feminists, however. African-American feminist thinkers and others concerned with the links between the twin social categories of gender and race were pointedly ambivalent about the lessons of the confirmation hearings. A particular source of pain was what Christine Stansell refers to as “the shell-game of identity politics,” by which Anita Hill, as a victim of sexual (rather than racial) harassment, was moved by both supporters and opponents “from the ‘black’ box to the ‘woman’ one, and from the ‘woman’ box to the ‘white’ one.”¹⁰ White feminists opposed to Thomas portrayed Hill as a woman harassed solely for her gender; but since, in the terms used above, the “unmarked” form of “woman,” in American racial terms, is “white,” by emphasizing her gender to the exclusion of her race these supporters of Hill effectively “deraced” her in their discourse—and left open to Thomas’s supporters the possibility of defending him as a Black man attacked solely because of his race. As Nell Irvin Painter puts it, “As the emblematic woman is white and the emblematic Black is male, Black women generally are not as easy to comprehend symbolically.”¹¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw concludes: “Content to rest their case on a raceless tale of gender subordination, white feminists missed an opportunity to span the chasm between feminism and antiracism.”¹² Despite their pain and ambivalence, however, many Black feminists responding to the hearings end on a note of hope, that one of the lessons of the hearings will be to broaden the definition of *woman* and *feminist*. And indeed the same triumphant issue of *Ms.* mentioned above includes incisive analyses of the hearings and their ambivalent racial messages by several leading African-American feminists.

A critical look at gender representations and politics in the United States since the hearings, particularly as expressed in the national press over the 1992 election year, seems to confirm the pained and ambivalent (but ultimately hopeful) views of Black feminists. Images of women in national politics were widely used during the 1992 campaign season, but they were put to two main uses: as images of domesticity, and as images of change. In both cases, they drew directly upon conventional gender imagery, and they were often used to send unchanged gender messages. In this sense, it is striking to note the degree to which the “unmarked” view of politics as fundamentally “male,” and the converse image of “women” as fundamentally “marked” in national politics, has not changed in two centuries. Yet images of women were also used in unaccustomed gender terrain, and they were at times given new interpretations.

One of the early results of the (white) feminist reaction to the hearings was Lynn Hardy Yeakel’s decision to run against Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter, who had led

¹⁰ Christine Stansell, “White Feminists and Black Realities: The Politics of Authenticity,” in Toni Morrison, ed., *Race-ing Justice, Engender-ing Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), p. 266.

¹¹ “Hill, Thomas, and the Use of Racial Stereotype,” in Morrison, *Race-ing Justice*, p. 211.

¹² “Whose Story Is It, Anyway? Feminist and Antiracist Appropriations of Anita Hill,” in Morrison, *Race-ing Justice*, p. 415. For a broad range of African-American responses to the confirmation hearings, see *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, special issue on “The Clarence Thomas Confirmation: The Black Community Responds,” vol. 22 nos. 1 & 2 (Winter 1991), reprinted as Robert Chrisman and Robert L. Allen, eds., *Court of Appeal: The Black Community Speaks Out on the Racial and Sexual Politics of Clarence Thomas vs. Anita Hill* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992).

the Republican attack on Anita Hill's credibility. Yeakel explained that she joined the race in April in direct response to the hearings: "'Those hearings galvanized me,' she said. 'I saw those 14 men who were making decisions that would affect me and my children and my grandchildren and their performance put me in a state of fury and embarrassment. The people started phoning me, saying: "This is the race. Specter is vulnerable."'"¹³ A former state Democratic chairman, who supported Specter, mocked this explanation, transforming Yeakel's words in a kind of male shorthand: "'Here, I've got breasts; vote for me.'"¹⁴ For some, such remarks stirred the embers of rage against the maleness of the Senate; yet they also served the purpose of pointedly emphasizing the "marked" nature of Yeakel's campaign, and thus of ironically deemphasizing the equally gendered nature of Specter's own campaign.

The initial feminist reaction to the hearings was made graphically in a June 1992 *Life* magazine photo spread with the caption "If Women... Ran America."¹⁵ Spread across two pages is the image of the almost empty Capitol steps, the forbidding expanse of cold marble interrupted only by the lonely figures of the two women then serving as Senators. Turning the page, the same background is repeated, dwarfed this time by a crowd of 98 women who stand in for the 98 male Senators of 1992. Two men, taking Senators Kassebaum and Mikulski's places from the previous photograph, are almost invisible among the female crowd. The women in the second photograph are workers in the Capitol area, familiar with the halls of power but not in power themselves. The authors of the accompanying text point out that this Woman on Top world on "the other side of the looking glass looks like sci-fi, or at least sitcom." The hearings may have marked the male Senate as male, but the presence of so many "marked" women in the world of politics must be the product of either horror or low comedy; the same imbalance could not have easily been shown graphically with a picture of the Senate as actually constituted in 1992, given the still unmarked nature of men in politics. The text goes on to suggest that, "if women ran America," the government would pay more attention to solving such intractable, and "domestic," problems as child care, maternity leave, homelessness, and poverty.

This use of images of women to call attention to what are known as "domestic" (as opposed to international) politics was widespread in the 1992 political season. As images of what could be called public domesticity, this use of women draws upon the conventional representations of the public as male and the private and domestic as female, which are transferred through an easy rhetorical sleight of hand to representations of international politics (especially the military variety) as male, and domestic politics (especially economic issues) as female. Mike Luckovich, for example, chose to illustrate the drabness of "Bush Economic Proposals" by attaching that label to a nondescript casserole dish, held by a George Bush dressed in skirt and apron; Bush's advice: "Before

¹³ J.D. Hinds, "The 1992 Campaign, Senate Race; Campaign Novice Is Leader in Polls," *New York Times*, 26 April 1992, sec. 1, p. 25.

¹⁴ As quoted in I. Wilkerson, "Where Anita Hill Is the Silent Third Candidate," *New York Times*, 31 August 1992, p. A1.

¹⁵ L. Grunwald, "If Women . . . Ran America," *Life*, June 1992, p. 36.

reheating leftovers, cover with cheese and voila! An exciting new entrée!..”¹⁶ In this cartoon Luckovich draws upon one of the stock characters of U.S. mass culture, the incompetent housewife, not in order to make a feminist comment or to “deconstruct” the image, but simply to ridicule Bush.

The old conventional imagery, uncritically used, almost obscures the novelty of equating competence in “domestic” issues such as the economy with female—and not just metaphorically female—skills. At its heart, this equation, which became a standard of the political commentary surrounding the 1992 elections, draws upon feminist insights at least as much as it draws upon old stereotypes of women as inherently “maternal” and “empathetic.” As the new conventional wisdom acknowledges, women come to their understanding of the need for reforms in child care, health care, employment, education, and poverty relief, through their lived experience in a country where women are much more likely than men to experience the dislocations of unemployment and low wages and to suffer from the holes in our health care system and the lack of adequate child care.

The image of women as intrinsically concerned and competent with domestic and economic issues became linked with the second image of women in politics, as icons of change. This second image largely took off from the Hill/Thomas hearings, which made clear to many the need for change in Congress, and which identified the needed change, in the first instance, with the need for greater representation for women in the legislature. As the election season progressed, and as dissatisfaction with the state of the economy grew (while concerns about “national defense” withered), the growing calls for change in U.S. domestic policies added to rather than displaced the calls for more women in Congress. The Year of the Woman merged with the Year of the Outsider; women running for office used their status as outsiders (the marked nature of their gender) to their good advantage in the campaigns—and were applauded for doing so.

Manly Politics, 1992

The much-noted entry of record numbers of women into national political life in 1992 was met, however, by a countervailing, concerted, and less noted effort to put the genie of gender back into the bottle. An effort, in other words, to keep “male” the unmarked category, and to keep “woman” marked as the uniquely gendered category.

In the struggle over the gendering of national politics, a key terrain for debate became the figure of Hillary Clinton (who once more became Hillary Rodham Clinton only after the inauguration). As a woman, as a candidate’s wife, as a potential “First Lady”—another familiar gendered term not to be found overtly in the Constitution,—Hillary Clinton could not simply stand for the principles or the policies that she wished. Like it or not, she also stood, as a kind of icon, for women in politics. Her femaleness was marked in a way that the maleness of the Presidential candidates never is.

Which is not to say that the gender of the male candidate is never contested terrain in itself. But since maleness is not marked in the national politician, the male candidate is faced with the peculiar problem of keeping his gender invisible by keeping it sufficiently “male.” In his 1988 campaign, Bush was confronted with such a gender-visibility problem—the *wimp factor*, as it was known in his case, an appearance of insufficient

¹⁶ Mike Luckovich for the *Atlanta Constitution*, reprinted in the *New York Times*, 13 September 1992.

“manhood” to “lead the country.” Bush resolved this problem, from 1988 on, through a strenuous program of attacking political opponents and, as President, of launching military attacks on foreign enemies with equal severity and determination. During the 1992 campaigns, the candidates’ ritual rival demonstrations of early morning jogging, fly fishing, long-distance swimming and so on (all of which proved so bewildering and so peculiarly “American” to European observers of the elections), served the same masculinizing purposes.

Though the gendering of national politics after the Thomas confirmation hearings may have intensified the use of gender images and confrontation over gender roles in the 1992 campaigns, the same old images were used in those confrontations. The attacks on Hillary Clinton were couched in the rhetoric of motherhood, “woman’s nature,” and family values. Bill Clinton’s highly effective response to those attacks was the quip, or rather the taunt, “You’d think [Bush] was running for First Lady.”¹⁷ This taunt operates entirely within the conventional bounds of gender representations, a fact made graphic when it was visually interpreted in a cartoon by Mick Luckovich. The cartoon imagines, under a banner announcing “Bush Inauguration,” Barbara Bush in a dark suit and tie, raising her right hand in a confident, “manly” gesture, as she is sworn in by Chief Justice Rehnquist, while George Bush, in dress, pearl necklace and earrings, looks on with “wifely” admiration.¹⁸ The point of the taunt and the cartoon—the ironic point, in the aftermath of the hearings—is not to challenge the gendered politics of the Republican right, but to use those very “traditional” images of gender roles to belittle Bush by depicting him as “female.”

The predictable Bush campaign response to the taunts was to reinforce the male-coding of the Republican candidate, with an emphasis on military imagery. In a series of photo opportunities, Bush was staged, looking confident in an up-beat pose, his arm stretched out in an expansive greeting, in front of an F-16 fighter plant in Fort Worth, and giving a thumbs up as he climbed into an F-15 fighter in St. Louis.¹⁹ The “weakness” of the images, however, was exposed in the accompanying captions, which revealed that the military jets were not being used to “defend” the United States, but that Bush was approving their sale to other countries (Taiwan and Saudi Arabia) in order to keep the manufacturing plants open and preserve a few jobs in one of the most depressed sectors of the economy.

In another photo-op, in which “Bush Seeks to Recast Himself As a Free-Market Feminist,” he looked rather uncomfortable in this unaccustomed pose, his arms held tightly at his side as he grinned, surrounded by some of “a group of about 400 women at the AT&T headquarters.”²⁰ But even as Bush attempted to respond in some positive way to the gendering of national politics, the Clinton campaign continued with their strategy of

¹⁷ *Newsweek*, 31 August 1992, p.25.

¹⁸ Mike Luckovich for the *Atlanta Constitution*, reprinted in the *New York Times*, 23 August 1992.

¹⁹ M. Wines, “As Washington Lives on Credit, States Live on Gruel,” *New York Times*, 6 September 1992, sec. 4, p. 1; T.L. Friedman, “Selling Arms to Keep Jobs: The Signals It Sends Abroad,” *New York Times*, 20 September 1992, sec. 4, p. 4.

²⁰ M. Wines, “Women Need Free Markets, Not Government, Bush Says,” *New York Times*, 19 September 1992, sec. 1, p. 7.

forcing Bush to fight on his political home turf. Where Bush appeared surrounded by corporate women, on the facing page of the *New York Times* Clinton appeared, a dour expression on his lips, next to the headline, “Clinton Says Bush Is Afraid of Debating ‘Man to Man.’”²¹ The message was clear. To shore up his conservative base, and his maleness, Bush went back to up-beat, “male” gestures, and to posing amidst fighter jets. There was no further mention of “feminism,” no matter how conservative, in the Bush camp.

In the end, the attacks on Hillary Clinton—or, more precisely, on the symbolism of Hillary Clinton, on “Hillary” as an image of woman in control and thus out of control—proved disappointing to Republican strategists. The “radical feminist,” out-of-touch-with-the-mainstream imagery fostered at the Republican National Convention was eventually deflated by a growing symbiosis between the national media and the Clinton campaign, in which “Hillary” developed a style easily framed within conventional expectations. The “heady backlash” that the *New York Times* and others saw in favor of Hillary Clinton in the following months²² resembled a cunningly drawn optical illusion. Part feminist and part antifeminist backlash, it was impossible to say with any certainty which was background and which was foreground.

Even as Hillary’s image was changed from “radical feminist lawyer” to “wife and mother,” the very transformation itself—carefully documented in media from the *New York Times* to *People*, much commented on, and much denounced by conservatives and antifeminists—fit in with conventional gender expectations. It was a “makeover”—something women do—and it was done in service of the political ambitions of “Bill” Clinton—something “political wives” do.²³ On the other hand, behind the traditional gender imagery, there was no doubt that the question of gender in national politics had been raised and was not going away, though it had been diverted for a time.

The diversions of the presidential campaign consistently diluted the original impact of the Hill/Thomas case, which had drawn public attention to the “invisible” male gender of those 98 male senators. The specific, political, and urgent question raised by the hearings—of why national politics is so dominated by men—was successively twisted and transformed, as if by sleight of hand, into a series of other, related but more traditional questions: the abstracted question of gender in politics; the conventional question of the politics of gender. “Gender” still being coded “female,” this in turn became, for example, the question asked by the *New York Times* in a three-part article just a month before the 1992 elections: “Who is the Good Mother?”²⁴

Challenging Gender Assumptions

²¹ M. Kelly, “Clinton Says Bush Is Afraid of Debating ‘Man to Man.’” *New York Times*, 19 September 1992, sec. 1, p. 6.

²² “Backlash for Hillary Clinton Puts Negative Image to Route/ Heady Backlash Helps Hillary Clinton Cast Off Image as One-Dimensional,” *New York Times*, 24 September 1992.

²³ “Backlash for Hillary Clinton Puts Negative Image to Route/ Heady Backlash Helps Hillary Clinton Cast Off Image as One-Dimensional,” *New York Times*, 24 September 1992.

²⁴ S. Chira, “New realities Fight Old Images of Mother,” *New York Times*, 4 October 1992, sec. 1, p. 1; T. Lewin, “Rise in Single Parenthood Is Reshaping U.S.,” *New York Times*, 5 October 1992, p. A1; E. Eckholm, “Learning If Infants Are Hurt When Mothers Go to Work,” *New York Times*, 6 October 1992, p. A1.

After the election, the images of women, made even more concrete by winning, remained as icons of a changing Congress. A heading of “New Faces: Year of the Woman, and of the Insurgent” is decorated with the smiling face of Carol Mosely Braun, who as a Black woman is visibly a “new face” in the Senate.²⁵ In fact, in a sidebar article briefly profiling the eleven newly elected Senators of 1992, the *New York Times* chose to run the photographs of the four women and the one Native American man who were chosen to serve. The six white men newly elected to the Senate, who were also, presumably, “new faces” in their own way, but not visibly so, were briefly listed, without descriptions.²⁶

Ultimately, it may be that the lag in gender representations, the continued paternalism implicit in regarding women as good at, say, family leave legislation (but not at “defense” or at foreign affairs), even the articles asking “Is There a Winning Look for Women Politicians?”,²⁷ may all be a small price to pay for several very real successes for women in the 1992 election. There were record numbers of women elected at all levels of government in the U.S. There was also an ongoing, though often unconscious reinterpretation of some of the most persistent of gender images. The image of women as “domestic” was stretched to include all aspects of “domestic policy”—in part, as a tribute to the ongoing struggles of actual women working within the U.S. economy.

Similarly, the longstanding political cartoonist’s cliché which depicts “the voter” as female (naturally: if the candidate is, almost by definition, male, the public that he is “wooing” or “courting” is correspondingly female) was reimagined in a cartoon by Signe Wilkinson which shows a woman, her skirt labelled “Women’s vote,” carrying Clinton over the threshold of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.²⁸ By redrawing the conventional image, this cartoon emphasizes that it was real women, not an abstract “voter” conventionally depicted as female, who cast the deciding votes in the national elections.

With the 1992 elections, although the idiom of gender representation has not yet changed in national politics, the actual political background which will serve as the stage for future representations has begun to shift decisively.

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²⁵ I. Wilkerson, “Where Anita Hill Is the Silent Third Candidate,” *New York Times*, 4 November 1992, p. A1.

²⁶ “Other Highlights,” *New York Times*, 4 November 1992, p. A1.

²⁷ “In the Year of the Woman, female candidates are finding they have to change their hair, their clothes, their smiles—if not their ideas—to please the electorate.” Aimee Lee Ball, “Is There a Winning Look for Women in Politics?” *McCall’s*, October 1992, p. 126.

²⁸ Signe Wilkinson for the *Philadelphia Daily News*, reprinted in the *New York Times*, 8 November 1992.