

COMMENTARY

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Hillary's loss is women's gain

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Hillary Clinton is no loser. It's true she lost the democratic presidential nomination to Barack Obama, but she has made many gains for women in America and beyond. In fact, given the absence of any comparably prominent women in Canadian federal politics, Ms. Clinton's record may be the best role model for aspiring young Canadian women today.

For decades the United States - the free and equal shining city on a hill - has had a blemish on its democratic record: no woman or African American has ever held - or come close to holding - the country's highest office. The corridors of power have been dominated by middle-aged white men, but this year's democratic presidential nomination race demonstrates that, for now anyway, this is no country just for old men. Decades of talk about equality and the empowerment of women have now become much more than that: the Democratic Party has walked the talk. A woman came close - so close - to being the presidential nominee.

Hillary's victories and her certain influence on her country going forward are noteworthy. Instead of focusing on her loss, we should be focusing on what she has accomplished.

Despite the blatant and shameful sexism Hillary faced throughout her campaign (exemplified by Tucker Carlson's remark that, when she came on TV, he instinctively crossed his legs), she did show us that a woman can play the politics game and can expect to achieve a reasonable level of success. But in a race, someone always has to lose. She didn't ask for different rules (save perhaps a reversal of the Michigan and Florida delegates ruling). She played the same game as the men did and she lost - this is part of the process. But there is still something to learn. And the lesson is not that women are not welcome in the halls of power. On the contrary, her second place photo-finish demonstrates that female candidates will not have power handed to them for reasons other than their own ability.

You don't get to be president without hard work, smarts, and savvy. Hillary Clinton has all of these, but so does Barack Obama. And perhaps he just had more of these, or the right combinations of these that appealed to more voters this time around. But this does not diminish Hillary's ability or her success - she didn't have to win to set an example for other women who want to take a run at the Oval Office in the future. After all, politics is not all about winning. It is about influence and fighting for what you believe is right - and Ms. Clinton exemplifies this. You might say she excels at it.

Unlike past also-rans, if Hillary Clinton left politics today she would not be forgotten. She is a political force of nature and has made her mark upon American politics and, with hope, will continue to do so. Hers will be an example for future women in politics because of how she fought, what she fought for, and those she inspired along the way, even those of us in Canada.

So far, our own track record of women in politics is dismal. Kim Campbell, our first and only female PM - for just over four months ^ was criticized for her poor campaigning skills, though pollsters argued that Campbell was just as popular before the election as she was on election day. This suggests that it wasn't her leadership that was being evaluated, but rather Brian Mulroney's. Sadly, she is often personally blamed for the demise of her party.

Similarly, the leadership of the federal NDP, under the tutelage of Audrey McLaughlin and Alexa McDonough, never regained their electoral fortunes after the rise of unpopular NDP governments in BC and Ontario. Unfortunately ^ and perhaps unfairly - female federal leaders have a legacy of leading their parties into the electoral wilderness.

It's not shocking, then, that Hillary Clinton has become a surrogate role model for Canadian women. In the 2007 Women's Political Participation Survey nearly 75% of Canadian women outside of Quebec identified Ms. Clinton as the woman running for the US presidency. This is slightly higher than those who could name Prime Minister Stephen Harper and it is three times higher than those who could name Michaëlle Jean as the Governor General. The women who did correctly identify Hillary tended to be university educated, which tells us that those women most likely to bump into glass ceilings are taking notice.

But there are also signs that Hillary's visibility, success and competitiveness are connecting with all women ^ even those with lower levels of political interest and knowledge. And this is a clear signal that she is shaking things up, asking us to question our complacency with male leadership.

And while these are positive developments, there is potentially a dark cloud to this silver lining: the sexism that Hillary Clinton faced, such as criticism of her so-called screechy „take-out-the-garbage% voice could very well deter some women from the political spotlight. Ultimately though, she came, she fought, she almost conquered. But she sure did a number on that glass ceiling.

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