



THE CONVERSATION Donna Brazile and Deborah Tannen discuss

# OUR Hillary Problem

Interview by **Katherine Lanpher**  
Illustration by **Philip Burke**

**FROM** op-ed pages to dinner parties to opinion polls, the verdict so far on Hillary Clinton's campaign progress seems to be this: She has a woman problem. ¶ And that problem is us. ¶ The *Washington Post*/ABC News and the *New York Times*/CBS News polls from June and July, for instance, showed Clinton drawing strong support from younger women and from women with no more than a high school education. But when it comes to older, affluent, highly educated women, Clinton's numbers lag. In other words, the very women most like Clinton are the ones who are the most ambivalent about her candidacy. What does that say about her? About us? ¶ We invited Donna Brazile, veteran political analyst, Georgetown University lecturer in women's studies and former Gore presidential campaign manager, to talk with Deborah Tannen, professor of linguistics at Georgetown and author of *You're Wearing That?: Understanding*

*Mothers and Daughters in Conversation* and other best-selling books about communication gaps. What does Hillary need to say to us? What do we want to hear? Read on.

**More** Have you seen proof of educated, professional women's ambivalence about Hillary in your own life?

**Brazile** Yes, I've seen it, and it's in the polls. Hillary Clinton is doing well with women voters. But elite women—upper-income women, women with certain educational status—tend to be either in the undecided column or leaning toward Obama or Edwards. She's having a much tougher time starting a conversation with them.

**More** Why are these women resisting her campaign?

**Brazile** They clearly want this first woman who actually has a shot at being president to be strong and successful so they won't be embarrassed, but they also seem concerned about whether she's going to play the political game in a way that would alienate them or somehow push women back. It's a conundrum her campaign has to deal with. Unlike working-class women, who tend to make up their minds pretty quickly in the campaign process, these women often wait until the very last minute.

**More** What are they waiting for?

**Brazile** They want what's called a comfort zone. They want more information. You know, for eight years, as an adviser on both of Bill Clinton's presidential campaigns, I had to defend Hillary. She was tough, she was smart; she's a woman of strong conviction. She's actually a doer. I mean, she loves hard work. But people clearly did not understand her. Her dilemma today, even as the front-runner, is that most Americans don't know her.

**Tannen** Also, the popular girl is widely hated.

Which sounds like an oxymoron: If she's popular, doesn't that mean everybody loves her? No, it doesn't. Donna Eder, a sociologist at Indiana University, studied middle school girls and found this: Girls get status by being close to the popular girl, and the popular girl can't be best friends with everybody; she's going to necessarily reject the overtures of most girls, so they hate her. Other researchers have found that girls don't like a girl who stands out. All this is at work in the feelings women have about a woman leader, especially if they think they should identify with her. Boys work differently. There is a leader, the high-status boy, and he tells the others what to do. Everybody accepts that.

**Brazile** There's something else at play. Younger women, women 18 to 29 years old, say that Hillary's being the first woman to hold the job would be the best thing about her being elected president. They're excited. But older women, more successful women, are very sensitive to any assumption that they would support Hillary Clinton on gender grounds. They prefer to come to their own decisions based on issues, her performance in debates and on the campaign trail, her ability to compete.

**Tannen** Do those same women feel uncomfortable about saying it would be great to have Obama because it would be great to have a black president?

**Brazile** Well, that's interesting. On "Would you be more willing to support a black candidate?" I'm seeing that voters tend to give Obama a bigger boost than Hillary gets from the supporting-a-woman question.

**More** How much of the ambivalence is because our generation thought a woman president would change the system, not simply play the game better than the others?

**Brazile** This could be generational. It's about how we visualize people in power. I've been in politics all of my life, since I was nine years old. People often ask me, "Did you have a role model?" I used to say yes. I mean, I had both male and female role models. But as I grew older and became more deeply involved, I learned that my role models were really a bunch of old men. I didn't see any young women—or women, period—holding power. Today you see women holding power in a number of positions, whether it's the secretary of state or the 16 women of the U.S. Senate or the speaker of the House. But I believe that this desire for Hillary to be more perfect goes back to who women are as individuals, as people, and often

**"Older women, more successful women, are very sensitive to any assumption that they would support Hillary Clinton on gender grounds."**



**Donna Brazile,**  
former Gore  
campaign manager,  
is not yet officially  
supporting any  
candidate.

we hold other women to much higher standards.

**Tannen** That is absolutely right. People expect far more of their mothers than of their fathers, and more of their daughters than of their sons. You know, you want your mother to drop everything, but, well, your father's busy; he's got other things to do. I experience that as a female teacher. All female professors experience that. Some students expect us to be everything. Be their friend, be there when they need us, spend hours in the office talking about anything they want, and they don't expect that of the male professors.

**Brazile** So is that my problem?

[Laughter]

**Tannen** Have you noticed that as well?

**Brazile** Yeah! I feel like I have 300 children.

**Tannen** [Laughs] On some level, people perceive every woman as a receptionist. It doesn't matter if she's the president; when they want a pen, they're going to go ask her for it. She's supposed to do

everything for you.

**More** Does all this "mommy responsibility" play into women's ambivalence about making it to the top?

**Tannen** Well, there's something else at work too. Our

images of how a man in authority should behave—in the workplace or in politics—are pretty congruent. If a man seeks to become a person of authority, he is seeking to be both a better leader and a better man. But our expectations for how a woman should be are at odds with how a person in authority should be. To the extent that a woman fulfills what we think a good woman should be, she's not acting the way we think a leader should act. And if she behaves as we expect a leader to behave, then we don't like her: She just doesn't strike us as a good woman. This is a challenge that every woman leader faces. They find many ways of overcoming it, but they have to overcome it. Also, there's a feeling that ambition is somehow shameful in a woman. **Brazile** That's right.

**Tannen** Obviously, anybody who is in public life is ambitious, or they wouldn't be in public life. But it's seen as slightly unsavory in a woman. There's often an assumption that if a woman gets to a high position, she must have gotten there by being too tough and mean. I've experienced this myself. Early on at academic conferences, I'd meet people and frequently be told, "Oh, you're so much nicer

"We have to be aware of language. When you hear Hillary commented on, just for a second ask 'Would this have the same meaning if it were said about a man?'"

than I expected." I'd always say, "Why wouldn't I be nice?" And they'd say, "Well, you've published so much."

**Brazile** I think there's a fear of being rejected by your peers once you've reached a certain status. I speak personally. Throughout the past 15 or 20 years, I was one of the highest-ranking women on Capitol Hill. This was before we had Pelosi and others. I was a chief of staff, working for Dick Gephardt, and I'll never forget one day when *Roll Call* published a list of the highest-paid congressional staffers. I was in the top 10. And, for about five minutes, I was embarrassed that I'd made the top 10. Then I thought, well, I'm doing the same work the guys are doing. But at first I didn't want to be on that list. I didn't want anybody knowing I had reached that pinnacle.

**More** Let's go back to the question of class for a moment. The phrase *women in need* has been applied to blue-collar, high-school-educated women who are firmly in Hillary's camp. What does that tell us?

**Brazile** From a political standpoint, those are the voters you go after first, because once they make up their

minds, they are with you, no matter what happens in the campaign.

**More** Why do they make up their minds so fast?

**Brazile** They get a message, and as a result they get a degree of comfort around the candidate. I can give you candidate after candidate I've worked with, and once those women gravitate toward you, you are locked. You are set to get 35 to 40 percent of the vote, and they never leave you. These women vote on pocketbook issues. They like strong advocates for children, strong advocates for public education; they want to hear candidates champion health care. With Hillary Clinton, they feel comfortable standing behind her. She has strong support among women of color, working women, blue-collar women; they're not going anywhere soon.

**More** What about black women? Aren't they moving from Hillary to Obama?

**Brazile** Well, they're looking at Obama, but they're not moving in any large numbers. Black women are the biggest prize in my judgment, because according to the current population survey, black women voter turnout rates

increased from 57 percent to 60 percent in 2004.

It seems to me that Obama is stalled in the polls because Obama cannot move black women.

Hillary can.

**More** How much of women's ambivalence is a reaction to the Clinton marriage?

**Brazile** Eleven percent of Republicans interviewed in a Gallup poll said they have a problem with the idea of Bill back in the White House. That's not bad. I saw it as high as 30 percent when she first ran for the Senate, and it's down to 11 percent.

**Tannen** Women in general are more likely to be seen through their relationships to men. You can be a male candidate and say very little about your marriage, but if you're a woman, people want to know if you're married and if so, what that partnership is like. The fact that she uses "Hillary" is good. From one point of view, it's annoying that she's called by her first name. We don't talk about Joe and Bill and John and Barack and Christopher: They all go by last names, but she's "Hillary." In this case it's good, however, because it doesn't constantly remind people of the man she's married to.

**Brazile** Remember that throughout the Clinton presidency, and even beyond, she has remained one of the most admired women in the country.

**More** A Republican strategist, Frank Luntz, said, "Put gender aside, just treat her as you would any other candidate." How possible is that?

**Brazile** [Laughs] Well, the Republicans have put gender aside. That's the problem. She has been treated like every male candidate I've ever worked for. The Republicans have never held back on Hillary; they've been attacking her since 1991. Pat Buchanan

continued on page 262



**Deborah Tannen**  
author and  
linguistics professor,  
is an enthusiastic  
Clinton supporter.

attacked her at the 1992 convention. Dole criticized her book *It Takes a Village* in 1996. So, 16 years after the Republicans started this attack against her, she's still standing with her 48 or 49 percent approval rating nationally; that's a good thing. George Bush won in 2004 with a 47 percent disapproval rating. Hillary can, if she has the right message, energize not just the party base but also the swing voters across the country and become the first female president. She's well-positioned.

**Tannen** Gender is always there in how we react to people, whether or not we're thinking about it as gender. That's going to sometimes work in a woman's favor and sometimes against her, but it's always there.

**Brazile** We look at her clothes; we look at her makeup. We listen to her every word; we watch her gestures. I was at the Democratic candidates' debate at Howard University, and throughout the debate I kept looking over at her, just to check her body language versus Biden's, Obama's and Edwards's. Edwards had his hands in his pockets most of the time when other candidates were speaking. Hillary looked like someone had told her to stand up straight—don't slouch. It was weird watching her body language versus the guys', who had more wiggle room to relax.

**Tannen** Everyone's watching her. So she has a reason to be more careful. There's a "blame the victim" thing here. She has to watch every word because she's under scrutiny. Then she's blamed for not being natural.

**More** What impact do you think Hillary's campaign is going to have on other women? We often hear about her as the transitional candidate.

**Brazile** It will be a plus for generations to come. I'll never forget the excitement I felt in 1984 at the San Francisco Democratic convention, when Walter Mondale announced that Geraldine Ferraro would be on his ticket. For the first time in my life, I saw a door open to me that I had assumed was closed. Hillary will open a door that's never

been open. She will shatter records, and we will be talking about her campaign for years to come. Now, here's my little grain of salt: There are days when I pray that her campaign gets off this cautious streak. There's no reason, when 70 percent of the American people disapprove of just about everything, to stick with the status quo. Can she be bolder? Yes. Can she be louder? Yes. She's done a phenomenal job. I give her and her campaign a B right now. Not an A, a B. But they're doing quite well.

**Tannen** Every time women see women in positions of power, it helps them feel comfortable with ascending to positions of power. So, yeah, it's going to change the world forever. To help this happen, we have to be aware of language. When you hear Hillary discussed or commented on, just for a second say that same thing in your head, and ask "Would it have the same meaning if it were said about a man?" The whole concept of bossy? It is said only about women because women are not supposed to tell other people what to do.

**More** Let's say I'm angry at Hillary because she hasn't apologized for her vote authorizing Bush to go to war. What would you say to me?

**Tannen** The point about apologies fascinates me. Demanding apologies in public life is a way to get a person to humiliate himself. That's the way men tend to react, and that's why so many women are frustrated that their husbands won't apologize. She thinks, an apology just says that you care. And he thinks, why does she want me to humiliate myself? But in public life, if you can get your opponent to apologize, you've rubbed his nose in the dirt; he comes out weakened. A lot of politicians follow the tenet: Never say you're sorry. A former Republican secretary of state in Florida, Sandy Mortham, once said, "I've seen women who over-apologize, but I don't do it. I believe you negotiate through strength." I think Hillary is more aware than anyone that she's in a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation. Whatever she says, a lot of people won't like it.

**Brazile** I agree.

**Tannen** She can't win by apologizing. And furthermore, she shouldn't, because she did what she did, and she's saying she did it for the reasons that, at the time, seemed right.

**More** What prescriptive advice would you give to Hillary Clinton's campaign to appeal to women like us?

**Tannen** I don't think she needs my advice. [Laughs] When you said it's "our" Hillary problem, that's right. People need to hear her and put aside unrealistic expectations. I can't tell you how many people I've heard say, "You know, I went to hear her speak, and I really expected not to like her, but she won me over." I contrast that with what I heard people say about Senator Kerry: "I went in expecting to like him, but he left me cold."

**Brazile** I would advise the campaign to avoid the incumbent label. Elections are about the future, and it's time that she focuses on being Hillary Clinton, president of the United States, and not remind us of Bill Clinton's presidency. She's a strong, credible candidate, but she's not the typical underdog outsider. She's an insider; she's someone who knows her way around Washington, and then some. There's anxiety among some women about what a female candidate means in the grand scheme of things, in terms of the future of the country, in terms of how we're perceived in the world. So I don't know exactly how she can do this, but people do have to be able to visualize Hillary as president, as the leader of the free world. To the extent that she can help us do that, she'll be able to bring in those women who are standing on the sidelines.

**Tannen** Try to put aside the way she's being served up by the press. We really need to remember that women are easier targets, and so, like everybody else, we're more likely to go after them. Stop and ask yourself, why am I thinking this? The double standard is still true.

**Brazile** To the elite women right now, I would just say, "Calm down. Calm down." Hillary will come around and present the change that we're all hoping she espouses in order to become the first female president. **M**