Framing Sarah Palin

Pit Bulls, Puritans, and Politics

LINDA BEAIL
RHONDA KINNEY LONGWORTH

AMERICAN POLITICS

"Beail and Longworth have written the type of book that many of us who study women as political communicators have been waiting to see on the market. These insightful critics offer a window on Sarah Palin as a phenomenon on the U.S. political scene. This analysis addresses rhetorical appeals to gender, race, and class that unite, divide, and polarize the U.S. populace."

—Patricia A. Sullivan, State University of New York, New Paltz

"Hockey Mom, Beauty Queen, Political Outsider, Frontier Woman, Post-Feminist Icon. Whether or not Sarah Palin holds political office ever again, there is no question that she changed the way that people think about women in presidential politics. Framing Sarah Palin helps us to understand the multifaceted nature of her surprisingly strong popular appeal, revealing the complex and dynamic relationship between pop culture and electoral politics."

—Susan Burgess, Ohio University

"A wonderful, extensive account of public commentary about Sarah Palin specifically, and women and politics broadly. Beail and Longworth miss nothing and offer readers a detailed account of how gender, ideology, and electoral politics intersect in American culture. Their observations remind us that women candidates encounter distinct challenges from men, but also that partisan differences among women cannot be overlooked. Students and scholars of political science, communications, and women's studies will be especially interested in this fine and thorough book."

—Ronnee Schreiber, San Diego State University

Sarah Palin's 2008 vice presidential candidacy garnered tremendous levels of interest, polarizing the American public—both Democrats and Republicans alike. While many have wondered who she “really” is, trying to cut through the persona she projects and the one projected by the media, Beail and Longworth analyze why she touches such a nerve with the American electorate. Why does she ignite such passionate loyalty—and such loathing? How did her candidacy mobilize the electorate and spark debates about partisanship and gender roles?

Using the notion of “framing” as a way of understanding political perception, the authors analyze the narratives told by and about Sarah Palin in the 2008 election—from frontier woman and political outsider to pit bull hockey mom, beauty queen, and post-feminist role model. They discuss where these frames are rooted historically in popular and political culture, why they were selected, and how they resonated with the electorate.

Framing Sarah Palin addresses the question of what the choice and perception of these frames tells us about the state of American politics, and about the status of American women in politics in particular. What do the debates engendered by these images of Palin say about the current roles and power available to women in American society? What are the implications of her experience for future candidates, particularly women candidates, in American politics?

Linda Beail is a Professor of Political Science at Point Loma Nazarene University, where she serves as Director of the Margaret Stevenson Center for Women's Studies.

Rhonda Kinney Longworth is a Professor of Political Science, Associate Provost and Associate Vice President for Academic Programming and Support at Eastern Michigan University.

www.routledge.com
Sarah Palin’s 2008 vice presidential candidacy garnered tremendous levels of interest, polarizing the American public—both Democrats and Republicans alike. While many have wondered who she “really” is, trying to cut through the persona she projects and the one projected by the media, Beail and Longworth analyze why she touches such a nerve with the American electorate. Why does she ignite such passionate loyalty — and such loathing? How did her candidacy mobilize the electorate and spark debates about partisanship and gender roles?

Using the notion of “framing” as a way of understanding political perception, the authors analyze the narratives told by and about Sarah Palin in the 2008 election — from frontier woman and political outsider to pit bull hockey mom, beauty queen, and post-feminist role model. They discuss where these frames are rooted historically in popular and political culture, why they were selected, and how they resonated with the electorate.

_Framing Sarah Palin_ addresses the question of what the choice and perception of these frames tells us about the state of American politics, and about the status of American women in politics in particular. What do the debates engendered by these images of Palin say about the current roles and power available to women in American society? What are the implications of her experience for future candidates, particularly women candidates, in American politics?

**Linda Beail** is a Professor of Political Science at Point Loma Nazarene University, where she serves as Director of the Margaret Stevenson Center for Women’s Studies.

**Rhonda Kinney Longworth** is a Professor of Political Science, Associate Provost and Associate Vice President for Academic Programming and Support at Eastern Michigan University.
FRAMING SARAH PALIN
Pit Bulls, Puritans, and Politics

Linda Beail and Rhonda Kinney Longworth
DEDICATION

To our children, Caroline and Joshua Beal, and Colleen and Jack Longworth, who challenge and inspire us every day. Thank you for adding so much love and laughter to our own narratives.
# CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments*  
*Introduction*  

## PART I  
**Conventional Frames: Republican Narratives**  
2 Frontier Woman  
3 Political Outsider  

## PART II  
**Contested Frames: Gender Narratives**  
4 Hockey Mom  
5 Beauty Queen  
6 Post-Feminist Role Model or Victim of Sexism?  
7 Conclusion  

*Notes*  
*Bibliography*  
*Index*
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to everyone who has helped us with the research and writing of this book. Thanks to Michael Kerns, our editor at Routledge, for his patience and encouragement; the Wesleyan Center for 21st Century Studies at Point Loma Nazarene University (PLNU) for a summer research grant; the provost’s office at PLNU for sabbatical funds; colleagues in the History and Political Science Department and the Women’s Studies Program at PLNU for their generosity and support, especially Kelli McCoy for references on Western women’s political mobilization, and Rosco Williamson and Lindsey Lupo for their wonderful camaraderie in the trenches of teaching politics. We also want to thank Eastern Michigan University (EMU) for sabbatical leave and research support funds that spurred early work that grew into this project, and the Political Science Department and Women’s and Gender Studies Department at EMU for their invitation to present our research as part of their Women’s History Month Program in 2011. We are especially grateful to PLNU students in Linda’s courses on campaigns and elections, and women and politics, as well as colleagues in the PLNU Social Issues Discussion Group, for reading and discussing early drafts. Enormous thanks to Kelly Kennedy for her invaluable student research assistance and indexing, to Kim Frey for her bibliographic research, and especially to Andrea Nauta for her expert editing efforts and research support.

We owe a special note of thanks to Lilly Goren at Carroll College for putting together the Midwest Political Science Association panel on gender, the presidency, and popular culture for which this work began, and to the Politics, Literature and Film section for hosting us. Thanks, Lilly, for your vision and encouragement to expand the project, and for cheering us on to completion. We’d also like to thank John Nelson at the University of Iowa for encouraging
our interest in political communication and popular culture, and for providing
generous opportunities to us throughout our careers.

_Linda would like to thank:_

Rhonda, I’m grateful for the opportunity we’ve had to work on this
project together. Thank you for the many years of friendship, and many hours
of thought-provoking and enjoyable conversation about American politics,
feminism, and popular culture.

Like all writers, I’ve discovered what a strong community one needs in order
to engage in this solitary task. I am grateful beyond words to the friends who
provided support in so many ways: Jennifer Lang, Melissa and Jeff Burt-Gracik,
Heather Ross, Catherine Chadwick, and Jo and Bob Birdsell. From listening
to my ideas, to letting my kids come and play, to encouraging me to keep going,
I couldn’t have done this without you. Sylvia Cortez Masyuk, thank you for the
many cups of coffee and the one-word email: WRITE!

Most of all, I’m grateful to have the amazing family that I do. My parents,
George and Sherill Beail, have always believed in me, and proved it tangibly
once again by providing encouragement and countless hours of childcare while
I was working on this project. Thankfully, I believe that time was as delightful
for them as it was helpful for me. My husband, Eric, held down the fort while
keeping my spirits up during the writing of this book. Thank you for being
such a generous partner, not just in this endeavor but also in all of our life together.
Your love and unwavering support are gifts of incalculable worth, and I hope
I return them in kind. My children, Caroline and Joshua, are the lights of my
life. Thank you for sharing your mom’s time and attention during this project,
and for the much-needed distractions of songs, jokes, stories, and hugs. Caroline,
your prolific creativity as a budding author yourself was a great example and
inspiration for your mom.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not say a word to honor the memory of two
wonderful men. The first is my grandfather, Leland Huggins. His love of talking
politics provided my first political narratives, and shaped not only my career but
also my life. The other is my father-in-law, Walt Schlumpf, who was one of the
earliest and most enthusiastic supporters of this project. I am grateful for his
encouragement, and sad beyond measure that he didn’t live to see its completion.

_Rhonda’s acknowledgments:_

My professional and personal life would have been far less rewarding if I had
not formed a friendship over 20 years ago with Linda Beail. We have been through
so many important events together and I have enjoyed the journey so much more
as a result of our partnership.
Acknowledgments

I was raised to believe that family is the core of any well-lived life. My experience has only confirmed the fundamental truth of that belief. My husband, Paul, has supported this project and me every step of the way. I am deeply grateful for such a wonderful teammate. My children, Colleen and Jack, inspired me to “get it done.” I am lucky to be your mom. My father, Donald Kinney, taught me that politics matters. He read the newspaper cover to cover every single day of my youth. We almost never share the same viewpoint but I appreciate that he listens and that he cares. My brother, TJ, knows best the balancing act it takes to live this life. My mother, Linda McWilliams, passed away in the months spent writing this book. Her loss served as a constant reminder that we don’t have forever to accomplish the goals we set for ourselves and seeing this project through to completion was important as a way to honor my family’s support and her memory.

True friendship is a gift. I can honestly say I would never have written a word of this book if it weren’t for some very special women. Susan McDonald has been one of the profound gifts in my life. I am grateful to have found my way to you. Linda Kinney entered my life for reasons I quit questioning a long time ago. Teri Green was the friend you wait a lifetime to find, a true soul mate. I miss her passion for life every single day. Another great source of encouragement throughout this project has been Margaret Crouch. I consider it a privilege to share ideas with her on a regular basis. Mary Linblade deserves a special thank you for her willingness to listen and to always tell me the unvarnished truth. And finally, I am grateful to my friend Julie Cook Booten, who reminds me to laugh—life is too serious to be that serious.

Like Linda, the process of writing this book has reminded me of how lucky I am for the community of friends and colleagues who supported this project in ways big and small. Christine Deacons, Chris Foreman, Akosua Dow, and Winifred Martin took on more so I could spend time working on the book. Susan Moeller fought for me when I needed it. I have been fortunate to work for some great folks who encouraged me in a variety of ways: EMU President Susan Martin, Provosts Donald Loppnow and Kim Schatzel, Associate Vice President Bette Warren, and Political Science Department Head Arnie Fleischmann. They each have my gratitude and sincere thanks.
Sarah Palin’s vice presidential candidacy garnered tremendous levels of interest, polarizing the American public. From the day John McCain chose her as his running mate until now, much of what has been written about Palin has focused on discovering who she “really” is: establishing her credentials and motivations, exploring her issue positions, or predicting her political future. Is she smart enough to govern? Are her policy positions or familial situations hypocritical? Will she run for president?

We are less interested in defining who Sarah Palin is, and more interested in analyzing why she touches such a nerve with the American electorate. Why does she ignite such passionate loyalty—and such loathing? To what degree did her candidacy mobilize new parts of the electorate? Using the notion of “framing” popularized by George Lakoff as a way of understanding political perception, we explain and analyze the narratives told by and about Sarah Palin in the 2008 election—from beauty queen, to outsider-maverick, to pit bull hockey mom. We discuss where those frames are rooted historically in popular and political culture, why they were selected, and the ways in which the frames resonated with the electorate. Generally we seek to answer the question of what the choice and perception of these frames tells us about the state of American politics, and about the status of American women in politics, in particular.

This book centers around the 2008 presidential campaign in which Palin’s image was a muddled one to be sure—a web of pictures and perceptions presented by her, her handlers, the McCain and Obama campaigns, political pundits, the news media, entertainers and popular culture communities. These images were made only more complex by the pre-existing views of various audiences both popular and political, and by the lack of firsthand understanding of Palin herself. Over the months of the campaign she was simultaneously understood and

1
INTRODUCTION
debated as a frontier woman, political outsider, hockey mom, beauty queen, and potential postfeminist role model.

Our analysis is situated in the research literature examining the gendered nature of the American electoral context, as well as the double-bind experiences of women candidates for political office. In framing themselves as candidates, women have had to react strategically to this context—to be “tough enough,” while still nurturing and feminine. This provides insight into the factors that resonated about each of the Palin frames and the importance of the Palin candidacy. We examine how she was situated among all candidates—male and female, Republican and Democrat—for executive office. We ask what the debates engendered by these images of Palin say about the current roles and power available to women in American society. Finally, we discuss the implications of her experience for future candidates, particularly women candidates, in American politics.

We pay close attention to race, class, and contemporary political geography as they matter greatly in understanding Sarah Palin’s candidacy. Her white, rural, and middle-class identity is important to how she is understood and the narratives that voters are likely to situate her within; these qualities also define her in contrast to her opponents. Narrative frames are most often relational and are not often employed or understood in isolation from one another. They intersect with and reinforce each other. Candidates may employ a variety of frames in a single contest, and narratives are chosen with attention to other frames employed in the election. They also reference historically relevant, important, or impactful storylines grounded in partisanship and gender. Sarah Palin’s candidacy is best understood not only in reference to Hillary Clinton and John McCain, but also to Joe Biden, Barack Obama, and even Michelle Obama and Tina Fey. Appeals referenced iconic Republican individuals and employed other narratives appropriated from past women candidates for office. The white, rural, working-class appeals of Palin make sense in light of her juxtaposition to Ivy league-educated women and an exoticized black candidate because we know how well they have worked for other Republican presidential aspirants since the 1950s.

Further, frames are not static or easily controlled by those who initiate them. Consumers interpret, respond to, and reimagine them—sometimes in sympathy with the original author and sometimes not. In the 2008 electoral contest, any attempt to comprehend Sarah Palin’s framing must include an understanding of Tina Fey’s impersonation of her with its resulting reinvention of these narrative frames. Fey’s humorous mocking of “mavericky” behavior and beauty pageant activities and mannerisms (e.g., fancy pageant walkin’ and talent portions of the competition) defined the Palin frames as much as anything the McCain/Palin campaign did itself.

So along with describing each narrative frame employed in 2008, our analysis explores where those frames are rooted historically in popular and political culture, why they were selected, and how each resonated with the electorate.
Finally, we discuss what the choices and perceptions of these frames tell us about American politics and the status of American women within that arena.

**Methodology**

The guiding thesis of this book is that narrative frames are important to understanding the experience of women candidates for national political office, and, in particular, the experience of Sarah Palin, beginning with her 2008 Republican nomination for vice president. As noted above, we suggest that frames are selectively employed as mechanisms by which to provide concise cues to consumers of political information in order to assist them in structuring and understanding their observations of candidates and electoral events. As Anderson and Sheeler suggest, these metaphorical narrative constructs serve as both strategic resources and as constraints upon political figures.¹ We analyze Palin’s experience as a candidate and political player from this perspective, closely examining those narrative frames employed by and about Ms. Palin.

In order to investigate the thesis, we ground our analysis first in a comprehensive and close reading of news media stories about Sarah Palin. To identify the frames, we reviewed each story published between the date of Ms. Palin’s announcement as the vice presidential nominee and the end of the 2008 campaign contained in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. These sources were supplemented with a broad review of online blogs and discussion boards encompassing those contained on *The Huffington Post*, *cnn.com*, and *Slate.com*, including everything in Slate’s *Double X* blog on women’s issues. For Chapter 3’s discussion of the role of evangelical tropes within the outsider frame, we reviewed the *Christianity Today* website archive on Palin in 2008, in addition to material contained in *Charisma* magazine and the *Concerned Women for America* blog. We also traced the links and threads that arose as the result of reviewing these sources, attempting to follow conversations to their original source—*Saturday Night Live* skits and other television programs, political cartoons, musical lyrics, viral photo-shopped pictures, posts to additional online blogs, articles in *The Weekly Standard*, *Vogue*, *People*, etc. The concluding chapter draws from the same source materials but includes items published since the end of the 2008 campaign.

We then determined the most common narrative frames that emerged within these venues. We paid particular attention to messages and discussions that contributed significantly to Ms. Palin’s public perception. Our goal was to not only identify relevant frames (although the group of frames we identify is instructive regarding the forces at work during political campaigns), but to examine the degree to which frames were employed, co-opted and contested in strategic ways. We intend the analysis to provide broader insight into the current and future possibilities for women candidates for executive office.

Our examination of news coverage, online discussions, texts from candidate campaign appearances and other campaign materials revealed a variety of ways
in which narrative frames served as strategic tools for Ms. Palin and for others hoping to characterize her in particular ways. Our discussion of longstanding partisan narratives—frontier woman, outsider-maverick, and faithful fundamentalist—suggests that Ms. Palin was placed by herself and others easily within these familiar and time-tested frames with little resistance or objection. On the contrary, gender frames such as average hockey mom, sexy puritan beauty queen, and new style feminist were highly contested and much debated throughout 2008 and in the years since.

Framing and Political Communication

With the rise of the mass media in the twentieth century, citizens, politicians, communication scholars, and political scientists have all wondered (and sometimes worried) about the powerful role the media plays in communicating political information. Is the media biased? In a democratic system where our ideal of governance is “of, by, and for the people,” do citizens get the kind of accurate and comprehensive information they need to make wise choices about who should represent them or which policies they support? Numerous studies have shown that the influence of political news coverage on public opinion is a complex process. Most of us are savvy media consumers, not easily convinced to believe everything we read or see on television. Media influence is not nearly as straightforward as presenting slanted information and having viewers uncritically accept those ideas or opinions. Rather than simply telling us “what to think,” the media seems to have more influence in suggesting what we think about, what criteria we use to evaluate issues and candidates, and how we structure, organize, and perceive information.

Scholars of political communication call these influences “agenda-setting” and “priming.” For example, when the number of stories in the media about crime increases, the percentage of people telling public opinion pollsters that crime is a major problem in America correspondingly goes up. But when the media turns their attention to a new or different issue (healthcare, say, or terrorism), more Americans report being concerned with those issues. By raising our awareness and giving us more information about some issues, the media helps to set the political agenda: it creates an environment where citizens respond by giving those issues greater weight and attention, and perhaps even demanding action or answers from political leaders. “Priming” is a similar process, applied specifically to how we judge political candidates. By reporting on certain characteristics, media reports encourage us to see those qualities as the most important ones to use in evaluating the candidates. If there are many mentions of some candidates being investigated for ethical reasons, it may prompt voters to recall how important honesty and integrity are to them in choosing a leader. But if much of the campaign coverage discusses the candidates’ résumés and qualifications, it may elevate experience over honesty as the most important quality voters are looking for.
(Of course, voters desire a combination of many valuable traits in their elected representatives, so this example is oversimplified. But priming does encourage voters to concentrate on certain qualities, while de-emphasizing others.)

In addition to setting the issue agenda, media narratives can also prime how we evaluate political issues. How those issues get discussed matters. The words, phrases, and stories associated with an issue can create support or opposition. Scholars and political strategists call this attention to words and narratives in shaping how we present an issue “framing.” In the mid-1990s, Republicans in Congress began calling the “estate tax” on large inheritances (affecting 1 to 2 percent of Americans) the “death tax.” This simple change in wording, used repeatedly, has a demonstrable effect on citizens’ views. Americans overestimate who is subject to the tax, telling researchers they think it applies to nearly half of households (since everyone “dies,” while an exclusive few have “estates”), and are thus far more likely to support its repeal.\(^3\) How and what information is presented affects how citizens think about the causes of political problems and, thus, how they should be solved. One experiment found when unemployment is reported on in human interest stories, with the focus on individuals or specific events, the audience is more likely to attribute the cause of poverty to individuals (and thus see little role for communities or government in responding or ending it). However, if unemployment is reported on as a social and political phenomenon, with explanations of its background and long-term implications, audiences were more likely to attribute responsibility to systemic or institutional conditions.\(^4\)

Framing of affirmative action policies as redressing past discrimination, or simply providing equal opportunity to all races, engenders fairly widespread support among Americans. Reframing the same issue as giving unfair advantage to some minority groups demonstrates far more opposition.

Media “framing” of issues can affect not just public opinion, but actual policy implementation. Researchers have found that a steep drop in the number of death sentences handed down since the late 1990s can be attributed to several factors—including a real decrease in the number of homicides committed and public opinion less favorable to capital punishment—but that the \textit{most} significant variable was the tone of media coverage, with a steady rise in stories about exonerations of inmates on death row. Media discussions of the death penalty added the “innocence frame,” the troubling notion of wrongly convicted persons being executed, to its more traditional frames (debating the morality and/or constitutionality of capital punishment). The rise of the “innocence frame” was about four times more powerful in predicting the decrease in death sentences than the actual number of exonerations.\(^5\) As the authors of that study note, “framing matters.”

Frames are the narratives and stories employed in communicating about an issue; they help to structure how we think about that issue by emphasizing some aspects or considerations over others, and by linking details of the issue together in a coherent way.\(^6\) Frames organize the details of an issue. The narrative helps us to make sense of a large, complex problem or issue by turning it into a story we
recognize (and know how to evaluate). As scholar and political strategist George Lakoff notes, simple narrative structures, with archetypal characters and events, help us to categorize new information into familiar stories that make sense to us. For example, a “rescue” narrative encourages us to identify a hero who triumphs over some evil misdeed of a villain to save an innocent victim.\textsuperscript{7} Framing is a two-sided process, however. The narrative is an external stimulus, evoked or created by the media, a campaign, or political elites. To be influential, the frame works by tapping into a cognitive \textit{schema} already in the viewer’s mind. These \textit{schemas} are psychological structures that organize information about social categories and provide a basis for evaluating issues. The \textit{schema}, once tapped, can “fill in the blanks” of missing information, helping us to infer more details about a situation because at least parts of it match the \textit{schema} in our heads, based on our past experiences and knowledge.

Invoking these story frames is less a conscious, deliberate choice than the unconscious work of neural binding in our brains. And these \textit{schemas} are not merely cognitive; they carry emotional content as well.\textsuperscript{8} Thus, frames powerfully structure the way in which we react to political events and why they matter to us:

\begin{quote}
Politics is very much about cultural narratives. For candidates it is about the stories they have lived and are living, the stories they tell about themselves, the stories the opposition tries to pin on them, and the stories the press tells about them. But in a deeper sense, politics is about the narratives our culture and our circumstances make available to all of us to live … Cultural narratives define our possibilities, challenges and actual lives.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

Psychologist Drew Westen concurs, stressing the importance of these “networks of associations, bundles of thoughts, feelings, images and ideas that have become connected over time.”\textsuperscript{10} The metaphors and stories that are most influential appeal to our emotional and moral sensibilities. Westen’s work urges Democrats, whom he sees as too focused on the rational merits of particular issue positions, to take note of the more savvy ways in which Republicans have couched their proposals in language and stories that connect with voters’ hearts and values: “Political persuasion is about networks and narratives.”\textsuperscript{11} Framing powerfully connects cognitive information and evaluation with affective motivations and responses. From the music and images of biographical films and political advertisements, to the anecdotes told in stump speeches and nonverbal signals such as flag lapel pins, campaigns attempt to frame candidates in ways that will connect emotionally and cognitively with voters’ positive \textit{schema}:

\begin{quote}
Political campaigns have long used narratives to bind groups, to create personalities, to define events, and to revere history … Political narratives often tend to revolve around characters who can be judged in terms of the morality of behavior, of who we are and what and how we are (or should
become), of what we value or disdain. Politicians use narratives to enhance techniques of identification and contrast, the use of stereotypes to enhance in-group and out-group distinctions. 12

These narratives also create the criteria by which citizens judge which political information matters, because “frames influence not only what people think and feel about an issue but what they don’t think about.” 13 Thus, the frames we employ help us to focus on some factors as extremely important, while discarding other aspects as not relevant.

What makes framing efforts most effective? While many framing experiments have studied citizen response to a single frame, analysis of news coverage of 14 different political issues demonstrated that, on average, 5.09 frames were used in describing the issues. 14 In the real world of politics, a single frame rarely dominates. Rather, different ways of framing an issue compete for influence and effectiveness. When are frames most likely to influence public opinion or policy preferences? In a study of proposals for a state-funded casino, James Druckman found that repetition or frequent use of the frame helps; more importantly, only “strong” frames impact public opinion. 15 Frames gain strength when they are both available and applicable. Availability refers to how quickly and easily the frame can be connected to the issue. Does this frame access the schema? Can it be readily brought to mind? And does it fit the issue at hand? 16 For example, what considerations come to mind when citizens think about an issue? If thinking about whether or not a hate group should be allowed to hold a public rally, does free speech come to mind as one important value or criteria to be considered? If so, “free speech” is an available frame. Then we might ask if “free speech” is the most important consideration, or if others, such as protecting public safety from rioting or incitement to violence, or a rejection of racial prejudice in favor of a commitment to equality of all individuals regardless of group membership, outweigh its importance. This latter question is the applicability issue: which frame, or set of considerations, is the most relevant and best way to assess the issue? If a frame is both available and highly applicable, it is likely to have a strong influence in citizens’ political decision-making. 17 Studies suggest that the strongest frames fit with our already existing cognitive biases, highlight specific emotions, contain multiple frequent arguments, and have been used in the past. 18

Frames may also be most powerful when they are implicit rather than explicitly evoked. When Clarence Thomas characterized his controversial Supreme Court confirmation hearings in 1991 as a “high-tech lynching,” he framed the issue racially. Viewers could access what they knew about American history and race relations to evaluate whether or not the hearings had devolved into a racially motivated, unfair attack on an African American man. Was this metaphor applicable and relevant? Was Thomas having a hard time being confirmed because his blackness threatened white power or privilege? The lynching frame competed with a sexual harassment frame that invoked gender, not race, as its most relevant
consideration, and many Americans based their support for or opposition to Thomas’s nomination on which frame seemed most salient to this particular situation. Yet, Nicholas Winter argues that the framing of other political issues, such as welfare policy, social security policy, and healthcare reform, can implicitly invoke race or gender schemas, even if they have nothing overtly to do with race or sex. In the ways that these seemingly non-racial or non-gendered issues evoke ideas about the legitimacy of differences, as well as the power dynamics and emotional relationships between different groups, he demonstrates that the policies are “framed” in ways that tap into deep race or gender schemas. The basis for evaluating policy shifts is based on which schema is evoked. Yet these shifts based on how an issue is framed are so implicit, so “natural,” that interrogating or critiquing the relevance or fairness of the frame becomes almost impossible. The more a frame seems uncontested and normal, the more powerful it can be. As Winters notes: “frames may be more effective when those promoting them do not emphasize the fact that they are engaged in persuasion. Insofar as the speaker conveys the idea that a particular frame is the natural and obvious way to view an issue, the frame will be all the more effective.”

Most political scientists have concentrated on the origins of frames (the choices political elites have made in presenting issues to their advantage) or the impact of frames (how they have shaped or changed public opinion or policy-making). Our interest in framing and the candidacy of Sarah Palin is not aimed specifically at either of these concerns. We are not trying to assign credit (or blame) for employing these narrative strategies to either supporters or opponents of the candidate; nor do we examine quantitatively which frames were most effective in moving public opinion regarding Palin. We are applying the notion of framing—usually used to discuss the presentation of political issues—to a candidate. Rather than noticing how frames encourage “pro” or “con” positions on an issue, we want to explore how a variety of narrative frames for this Republican woman vice presidential candidate both shape public response to her and contribute to wider public debates around partisanship, faith, populism, and feminism. The narratives about Palin tap into already existing schemas: of self-sufficient, rugged pioneers often referenced by the Republican party, or of the pretty-but-not-too-bright beauty queen in popular culture, or the maverick reformer willing to buck partisan loyalties. Even as Palin’s candidacy evoked these schemas, the particulars of her narratives and the responses to them by citizens also changed the schemas themselves—reshaping them for the future and reinforcing their salience. We are interested in how Palin’s candidacy rewrites the familiar narratives, and how they can be used by other Republican and women candidates in the future as a result.

For many American voters, their understanding of who Sarah Palin was as a candidate was inextricably linked to Tina Fey’s spot-on impersonations of her on Saturday Night Live. As YouTube made watching these skits more accessible, millions of voters found their impressions of what was true or relevant about the Palin candidacy shaped by the quirks and critiques Fey embodied in her
performances. While the lines between political campaigning and “infotainment” have become increasingly blurred since Bill Clinton’s saxophone-playing stint on Arsenio Hall, today’s voters have come to rely on media such as The Daily Show and Saturday Night Live as important sources of political information. Popular culture plays an important role in creating the schema that the Palin campaign narratives drew on, and in communicating political information in the twenty-first century. While some wring their hands, worrying about the “dumbing down” of civic discourse or the inferiority of “infotainment” to hard news, political communication scholar Jeffery Jones argues that satirical television cannot only be a source of good political information, but is more effective than traditional media in interrogating and critiquing the powerful. 24 Not only that, but satires such as The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, and Real Time with Bill Maher engage citizens in politics by making them laugh, and allowing them to participate in making meaning of political events in ways that connect to their daily lives. As Liesbet van Zoonen notes: “Politics has to be connected to the everyday culture of its citizens; otherwise it becomes an alien sphere, occupied by strangers no one cares and bothers about.” 25 For van Zoonen, citizenship has a lot in common with being a “fan” of some cultural phenomenon: it keeps a person involved in seeking information, talking with other “fans” in order to make sense of what happens or to persuade them of one’s own interpretation and preferences, and being emotionally invested in the object, securing continued commitment. 26 There is real value to recognizing that while political issues and ideologies are serious, engaging in politics can be fun. Even when the issues are serious or the stakes of the election are high, there is real pleasure to be gained in talking about politics with others to learn more or have one’s own experiences and opinions validated. There is enjoyment and excitement in cheering on one’s preferred candidates, or creatively thinking about solutions to political problems, and emotional reward in seeing one’s preferred leaders or policies succeed. If politics is not in some ways pleasurable, why would citizens continue to engage in it? The use of popular culture elements, like stories and narrative, are ways in which the media “entertain the citizen; in other words, how they make it pleasurable to engage in politics, and how they maintain the idea that politics is important.” 27 Framing, particularly as it draws on popular narratives that we are all familiar with, provides ways for ordinary citizens to connect with and make sense of political events and personalities using tools from their everyday lives. Jeffrey Jones notes that politics “is increasingly a textual practice,” and it is through media and popular culture texts that we access politics:

They constitute our mental maps of the political and social world outside our direct experience. They provide a reservoir of images and voices, heroes and villains, sayings and slogans, facts and ideas that we draw upon in making sense of politics. They provide the constituent components of the narratives we construct for organizing, interpreting, explaining,
understanding, and adjudicating the realities and illusions we find within the media, but also within our lives. They are ritual encounters with public life that help in our understanding of who and what we are as individuals, a community, a public, and a nation.  

Jones is particularly interested in the use citizens make of popular media narratives, arguing that they are the raw material we use to create our own political sense of identity, our “semiotic self-determination:” “The constant and habitual scanning of mediated political culture for persons, issues, values, styles, rhetoric … is the means through which civic identity is increasingly established, constituted, and maintained.” Thus, the framing of political issues or candidacies, such as Sarah Palin’s, matters not just in helping us to decide how to vote, but in shaping our own citizen identities and values in response to these narratives and frames. In studies of political issues such as abortion and the environment, researchers have found that television narratives become a catalyst for conversation about the issues. People talk about what they have seen with other citizens, and they also use the narratives and situations the television stories provide to respond to the issue—with deeper understanding, agreement, or to articulate back a different point of view. Thus, we have every reason to expect that media and cultural narratives—such as the newspaper and newsmagazine stories about Sarah Palin, blog posts and editorials about her, and *Saturday Night Live* skits and political cartoons caricaturing her—are important resources for viewers and voters. Citizens use the narrative frames they find there to make sense of the 2008 election, to define Republican party values (particularly with relation to populism and faith), to engage debates about gender, parenting, and feminism, and to relate all of these issues to their own lives. We are interested in how Palin is able to draw on these, and how they are tweaked by her differences (particularly gender) from previous Republican candidates for president. Other frames are drawn from popular culture, familiar archetypes of women: the pioneer woman, the supermom, the beauty pageant contestant, and the feminist. These frames occasioned debate over how aptly each of these narratives fit Palin, but also how well they capture modern American women’s lives, aspirations, and achievements. Popular culture is, indeed, contested political terrain, “a complex site of citizenship.”  

In the chapters that follow, we analyze the influence of popular culture, particularly Fey’s characterization of Palin, on shaping voters’ views of the candidate, and on what we might expect the relationship between entertainment media and political campaigns to look like in the future.

**2008 Electoral Contest**

Campaigns do not happen in a vacuum, but instead play out within a political environment that can and does influence issue and event selection, candidate