

The Enthymeme Gap in the 1996 Presidential Campaign*

As scholars puzzle over the so-called gender gap in the 1996 presidential election, we invite them to consider the ways in which communication by the Clinton campaign explicitly and implicitly told women that Clinton was a president more closely allied with their concerns than Dole. When we examined 111 Democratic and 79 Republican speeches and 56 Democratic and 31 Republican ads that were delivered or appeared during the presidential campaign between the conventions and election day, we found Clinton blunting the traditional Republican argument that Democrats favor big intrusive government and oppose “family values” by arguing that he had used government to protect women’s rights, health, and children from the assaults of Dole-Gingrich and their allies—the tobacco and gun lobbies. This theme was reinforced by Democratic ads that situated Clinton within the context of the family and by Democratic rhetoric in which women, children, and families were central elements.

In the wake of the health care reform debacle, Clinton declared in his 1996 state of the union address that the era of big

government was over. He might have more appropriately said that the rhetorical role of government had been transformed. Rather than supporting programs that could be tagged as governmental intrusions, Clinton offered proposals that increased parents’ sense that govern-

ment would help them ensure the safety and well being of their children. So, for example, in the 1996 campaign, Clinton’s ads showed him supporting school curfews, school uniforms, bans on cigarette ads aimed at children, and requiring teenage mothers to stay in school or lose welfare. Clinton appointed a drug czar, said the ads, Dole fought naming one and tried to “slash” anti-drug programs. The Democratic standard bearer also allayed parents’ financial worries about whether there would be enough money to send children to college by promising financial

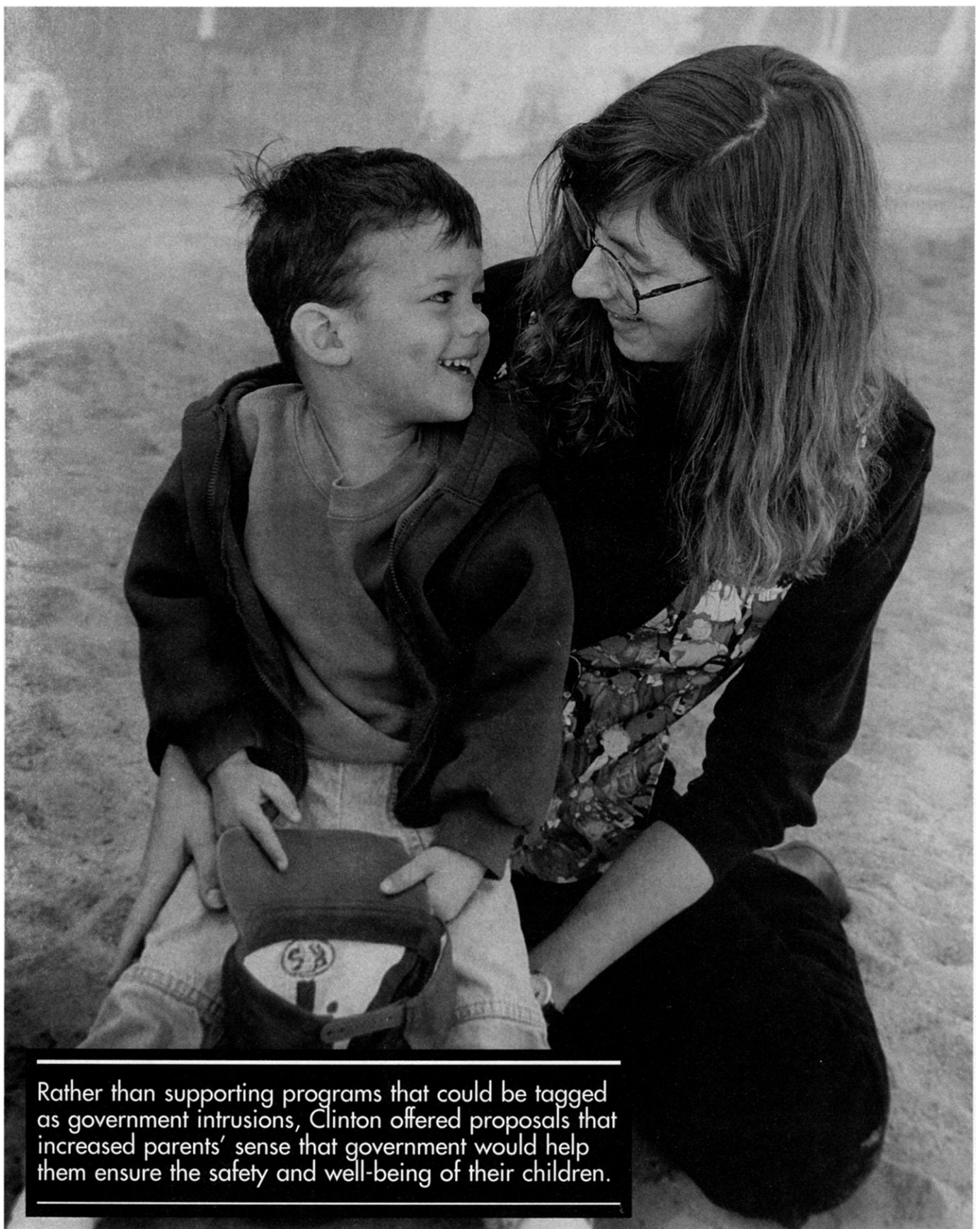
support for education. By contrast, the Clinton ads noted, Dole-Gingrich wanted to cut college scholarships.

Because women are more likely than men to care for children and also because there are more single mothers than fathers heading households in the country, Clinton’s campaign ads and promises can be understood to enthymematically appeal to women. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle described the enthymeme as the “very body and substance of persuasion” (Aristotle 1: 1345a). Enthymemes function by suppressing premises that are then filled in by members of the audience. Out of this complicity come conclusions whose impact is heightened by audience participation in their construction.

The Democratic ads also reinforced the belief that Clinton would use the power of government to safeguard a woman’s personal autonomy while Dole would not. Clinton “protected a woman’s right to choose,” said the ads. Dole opposed it and sought a “constitutional amendment to ban abortion.” Clinton “toughened laws to fight domestic violence.” Dole voted against programs to fight it. Clinton signed Family and Medical Leave. Dole led a six-year fight against the bill. Clinton signed the Brady Bill. Dole-Gingrich voted against it and against the assault weapons ban. Women are either more likely to support the Democratic position on reproductive rights, domestic violence, healthcare, and gun control than are men or to more heavily weigh the position of a candidate in making a voting decision. According to *Newsweek*’s preconvention poll, for example, one-third of the women said that the Republican nominee would “go too far” in “undercutting abortion rights” (McCormik and Leland 1996). A September 1996 poll found women 5% more likely than men to support The Family and Medical Leave Act (Hart and Teeter 1996).

To the implicit claims that Clinton supported women’s rights and understood their family needs, the Democratic campaign added a show of concern for their health by coming out in favor of increased funding for breast cancer research. At the same time, Clinton defended positions and programs that have a greater impact

by
Kathleen Hall Jamieson
University of Pennsylvania
Erika Falk
University of Pennsylvania
Susan Sherr
University of Pennsylvania



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Rick Reinhard, Impact Visuals, 1995.

on women than men. Clinton supported an increase in the minimum wage, and Dole opposed it, a contrast of particular interest to women, since more women than men earn the minimum wage. Dole-Gingrich tried to “slash” Medicare and supported increases in its premiums, Clinton protected Medicare funding, a claim designed to appeal specifically to the gender more likely to care for elderly parents and also, more likely, on average, to live longer than the male of the species. Clinton’s allegation that Dole tried to weaken nursing home standards was another version of the same appeal.

Rhetorical indicators of Clinton’s focus on the women’s vote can also be found in his speeches in which women, children, and families are more prominently featured and are discussed in a more empathetic fashion than they are in Dole’s addresses. For example, in his speeches, Clinton mentioned “woman” or “women” 189 times on 72 different occasions, while Dole did so 106 times on 49 different occasions. When speaking of and to women, Dole was less likely to refer to issues of specific concern to them. Sixty-eight percent of the time, Dole used the word *women* with the word *men* as a synonym for people, as in “businessmen and women,” and “men and women in the armed forces.” On only 14 occasions (13% of all references to women in his speeches) did Dole mention women in the context of such issues as “women’s wages” and “violence against women.” In these instances, Dole tended to paint women as victims. For example, the Kansan offered the claims that “women are forced to work,” “wages of women have gone down,” and “women and minorities are victimized by specific acts of discrimination.”

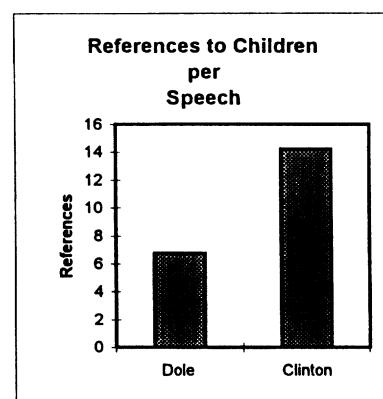
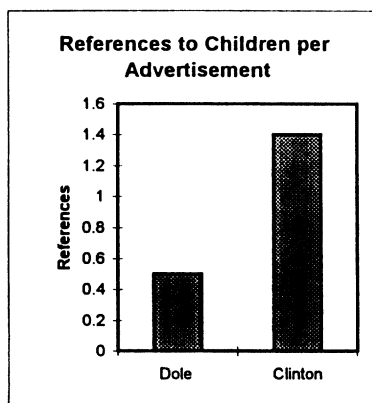
Clinton was much more likely to actually talk about women when he mentioned them in his speeches. On only 22 occasions (or 12% of all references) did Clinton use the word *women* in conjunction with the word *men* as a synonym for people. In most other instances he was speaking about issues directly tied to women’s lives. Here, Clinton’s topical range was wider than Dole’s. Clinton mentioned issues concerning women and pregnancy 19 times, women and business 17 times, and violence against women 10 times. In addition, Clinton discussed women and welfare, women and science, women and poverty, and women and work.

Unlike Dole, Clinton frequently cited women as examples, including a mayor who was a woman, specific women who were on welfare and then became entrepreneurs, and women who were grateful for The Family and Medical Leave Act. In short, women, issues of special concern to women, and examples of women played a more prominent role in Clinton’s speeches than in Dole’s. Clinton was also more likely to speak about women exercising authority or power than was Dole. For example, Clinton suggested that God might be a woman and spoke about women surviving poverty, starting businesses, becoming astronauts, and no longer being forced out of the hospital after pregnancy. Clinton addressed

women’s rights and prerogatives without portraying women as helpless.

Clinton was also more likely than Dole to specifically mention family, students, children, and school. We calculated the rate of word use per speech and ad of *children*, *child*, *kids*, *grandchild*, or *grandchildren* in order to correct for any variation in number of speeches and ads between the two candidates. Figures 1 and 2 show that Clinton referred to children far more often than did Dole.

Since women are more likely to shoulder the majority of the responsibility for child care, mentions of children probably elicited more female than male interest. The Republican campaign mentioned “family” 12 times in 11



different ads for Dole. The Democratic campaign mentioned “family” 34 times in 23 separate ads for Clinton. The same pattern held in the speeches. Dole mentioned “family” 415 times on 67 separate occasions, while Clinton mentioned it 928 times on 104 occasions, more than twice as often as Dole.

Not surprisingly, the context in which Clinton and Dole situated their references to families also differed. Dole’s allusions most often occurred within discussions of his proposed tax cut, often described as a “tax cut for families.” Consistent with party heuristics, Clinton was far more likely to refer to families in the contexts of health insurance, disabilities, and working together. Here too, Clinton was more likely to focus on families, and, when he did, he was more likely to discuss them in contexts historically considered women’s domains. Dole mentioned families less often and in the context of taxes, which are stereotypically considered men’s domain.

Dole’s tendency to discuss family issues in economic terms was also manifest in his discussion of children. In his speeches, Dole frequently outlined his plan to provide a \$500 per-child tax credit for working families. During these explanations, in what appeared to have been an attempt at humor, Dole referred to children in the audience as living tax credits. On October 23, 1996, Dole spotted three children in the audience. He said to someone in the crowd, “I see . . . bring those three babies up here. . . . These are three young conservatives right here. Oh here’s . . . look at this. There’s \$2,000 in credits right here, \$500 a piece [sic].” Later that day,

Dole stated that “every child under 18 behind me is a \$500 credit. You can do a lot with a \$500 credit.”

Rather than emphasizing the emotional bond between a child and a parent by indicating how the credit would help parents provide for their children, Dole tended to jokingly depict children as economic commodities. This framing lacked the empathy of Clinton’s more personal discussions.

Compare, for example, Dole’s discussion of children as tax deductions with Clinton’s treatment of his proposal to give tax credits to parents who adopt. Instead of stressing the economic consequences of adoption in his September 2, 1996 speech, Clinton noted that “there are a lot of children out there who need a good home today. I hope this helps more of them find it.”

The visual images used in the Democratic campaign’s ads for Clinton also implicitly invite women to identify with them. Families and children appear repeatedly throughout the advertisements. Often, the interaction of women and their children is featured. Women are shown helping their children with homework, carrying in groceries with their children, and sending their children to school with lunch in hand. The images of Clinton that close the ads suggest a benign presence who ensures that government helps the mother, family, and children realize their dreams because, as the ads repeatedly note, he shares “our values.”

The gender of the children in the ads also invites female identification. When individual children appear in the advertisements, they are often girls. One spot focuses exclusively on a baby girl. As she squirms happily, the voice-over tells parents that, today, they will decide what she eats and what she wears, but she is also counting on them to choose the right president. Two separate images appearing at the conclusion of several of Clinton’s ads show Clinton engaged in conversation with young girls. In two other spots, we meet two young victims, one of illness, the other of violence, both are girls.

Finally, ads for Clinton addressing teen-age smoking focus on a female smoker. A hand is shown in a long shot distributing cigarettes to three young people. The



Donna DeCesare, Impact Visuals, 1993

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camera then moves in for a close-up of a girl’s face engulfed in smoke. One of these ads is introduced by the widow of a tobacco lobbyist who has children of her own. She explains that it was her husband’s last wish that no more children start smoking. The combination of this testimony (from a mother) and the image of the girl choked by smoke, may enthymematically create the impression that children are victims of tobacco, rather than complicit in their own unhealthy actions. It may be easier to imagine one’s child as a victim of, rather than a willing participant in, bad behavior.

Anti-drug ads run by the Republican campaign also argue that children are victims. However, in these ads for Dole, they are the victims of Clinton’s drug policies. Unlike the Clinton spots, the visual content of these ads makes children appear dangerous and irresponsible. These black and white Dole advertisements use slow-motion film and jarring music. A boy smoking crack turns suddenly toward the viewer with an anxiety-filled expression on his face. Unlike the foggy smoke choking the girl in the Clinton ad, there is no visual implication that this child is at the mercy of some nefarious force. At the same time, the black and white film and hazy surroundings make it more difficult to associate the children in the ads with those one knows well.

In trying to make sense of the so-called gender gap, scholars have noted that women are more likely than men to affiliate with the Democratic party and support government programs (Conway, Steuernagel, and Ahern 1997). In this article, we suggest that women may do so, in part, because Democrats support and feature issues such as preserving Medicare and raising the minimum wage that disproportionately affect them. To this justification, Clinton in the 1996 campaign added a rhetoric that cast government as the protector of women’s rights (e.g., guarantor of abortion rights and Family and Medical Leave), health (e.g., provider of funding for breast cancer research), and families (e.g., supporter of the as-

sault weapons ban, the Brady Bill, curfews, school uniforms, and educational scholarships). This rhetoric not only blunts traditional Republican attacks but also explicitly defines government as a means of empowering women.

Note

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