
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Not wanting to believe the results

Press Criticism | By Craig Gurian | Gender equity, NYC, Politics

Sept. 25, 2013 — That gender-based stereotyping still can create challenges for women who are candidates for public office, challenges not faced by their male counterparts, is a sad reality of American political life. But the truth of that general proposition does not mean that gender-based (or other) stereotyping plays a meaningful role in every political campaign. Unfortunately, a [post-primary article in The New York Times](#) co-written by Kate Taylor couldn't or, more accurately, didn't want to, grapple fully with that latter fact.

The result: a dog-that-didn't-bark story asserting that New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn's "fall from front-runner status to a distant third place finish in the Democratic primary is now stirring intense debate about whether her femaleness, or her homosexuality, played any role in her struggle to win over voters."

In over 250 stories about the mayoral race, not one focused on the Quinn's dictatorial approach to what legislation saw the light of day.

Actually no. While the article spends most of its time on those who raise questions related to gender bias, it concedes that Quinn lost for a variety of reasons not related to gender or sexuality, including "her close association with the plutocratic incumbent mayor" and "her inability to be a change candidate in an election in which voters sought new direction." Not one person, it turns out, "blamed her loss wholly, or even mostly, on gender."

The article also had to acknowledge the results of an [Edison Research exit poll](#). That poll showed that Bill de Blasio, the victorious candidate in the Democratic field, trounced Quinn just about as thoroughly among all women (39 percent to 16 percent) as he did among all men (40 percent to 14 percent). Among African-American women who voted, 47 percent supported de Blasio, and only 6 percent supported Quinn.

What about Quinn's record as Speaker?

The most critical substantive element missing from the story was any exploration of how voters might have been reacting to the profoundly undemocratic way that Speaker Quinn had run the City Council for the previous eight years.

This failure may have stemmed in part from Taylor’s apparent sympathy with the Quinn campaign. Taylor’s campaign coverage, after all, kicked into high gear with her [puff-piece interview](#) with the Speaker, a tool in the Quinn campaign’s orchestrated attempt to humanize its candidate. It continued through the primary season to do the campaign’s bidding (as with an entire article [devoted to a preview of a Quinn speech](#) to set the table for themes that Quinn wanted to pound).

Or it may merely have been a function of Taylor’s allergy to substantive reporting (as when she wrote an entire piece on [de Blasio’s fight to keep local Brooklyn hospitals open](#) from a campaign strategy perspective, ignoring entirely the question of whether de Blasio’s position had any merit).

But these theories are probably too narrowly focused.

Surely, other reporters for the paper gave extensive coverage to the Speaker’s record in blocking votes or even public hearings on proposed legislation she did not like, didn’t they?

Quinn’s dictatorial approach to what legislation saw the light of day was certainly the defining feature of her speakership, so much so that, in [Mayor Bloomberg’s now infamous exit interview with New York magazine](#), it was the quality about her he cited: “She did a very good job for seven and a half years of keeping legislation that never should have made it to the floor, that would have been damaging to the city, from ever getting there.”

While Michael Grynbaum’s wrote a [page 1 article on Quinn’s early career](#), the article did not follow the story into the period when Quinn assumed office.

So I reviewed the over 250 stories about the mayoral race, large and small, that appeared in the print editions of the New York Times from the beginning of June through last Friday. *Not one focused on this aspect of the Quinn record.*

It’s astonishing, really. Give plenty of room for horse-race and strategy stories. But nothing on how Chris Quinn ran the City Council? It would be bizarre enough in any circumstance, but two of the major issues in the 2013 campaign — stop-and-frisk and unpaid leave — illustrated a broader pattern of not only aligning herself with business interests and Mayor Bloomberg but also of an unwillingness to allow the voice of a majority of City Council members to be heard.

Embedded assumptions

My own view is that this is a classic case of a newsroom caught within its own assumptions. Everyone “knew” that Chris Quinn squashed legislation, but it wasn’t “newsworthy” because, deep down, the reporters shared the Bloomberg view that legislative authority was too important to trust to rank-and-file legislators.

It wouldn't be the only occasion where the reporter's assumptions shaped campaign coverage. In a piece on [how de Blasio was taking on income inequity in the City](#), Michael Barbaro saw the candidate's approach as the "season's riskiest calculation" in a city where residents have become "comfortably accustomed" (assumption, no evidence) to the "smooth-running" (assumption, no evidence), "highly efficient apparatus of government under Michael R. Bloomberg" (assumption, no evidence).

Of course, the New Yorkers imagined in the piece may have been from similar socioeconomic precincts as the New Yorkers with whom Taylor opened her piece: "two dozen accomplished women — bankers, law firm partners and technology executives," including "Mary Ann Tighe, the real-estate executive, and Diana L. Taylor, girlfriend of the current mayor."

Residents of New York more broadly understood, the primary showed, were not living in the city in which Barbaro was living.

What comes next?

The general election is in six weeks. Joseph Lhota, the Republican nominee describes himself on his campaign website as having been "an integral part of Mayor Rudy Giuliani's core management team." During the eight years that Giuliani was mayor (1994 to 2001), Lhota held administrative positions, including budget director during Giuliani's first term, and was deputy mayor for operations in Giuliani's second term.

The substance of what he did in the Giuliani administration would seem awfully relevant to Lhota's run for mayor. Unlike what happened with Speaker Quinn's record — where the Times waited until after the primary to mention that [Quinn "used her position to block legislation that she \(often in alliance with Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg\) opposed"](#) — perhaps the Times will report on Mr. Lhota's time with Mayor Giuliani *before* the general election is held.

Research assistance: Michelle Mayer

Correction (Sept. 26): The pull quote on page 1 has been corrected to clarify that, as stated clearly in the story, the lack of coverage complained of was a lack of coverage of the Speaker's dictatorial approach to what legislation saw the light of day.

Disclosure note: The editors (strictly in their individual capacities) have been supporters of the de Blasio campaign.

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