Chipping at a Political Glass Ceiling

BY JO KAULETZ

When former U.S. Sen. Carol Moseley Braun campaigned as the only woman among the nine presidential candidates this year in the Democratic primaries, she was told by enthusiastic voters that it was “about time” a woman was running. Speaking at a recent Barnard forum on women’s progress in the political arena, Braun said she is optimistic about the public’s attitude toward a woman serving in the highest office but believes more work needs to be done before this milestone can be achieved.

Braun joined Barnard President Judith Shapiro and two of the nation’s leading writers on women and politics for a panel, titled “What Will It Take for a Woman Win the White House,” on March 8, International Women’s Day. The discussion included Marie Wilson, co-founder and president of The White House Project and author of a new book, Closing the Leadership Gap: Why Women Can and Must Help Run the World; and journalist Eleanor Clift of Newsweek magazine and the political TV show The McLaughlin Group. Clift also wrote an important book, Madam President: Shattering the Last Glass Ceiling.

Braun told an audience of 400 students, faculty, alumnae and guests that she encountered a disconnect between voters around the country and Washington political leaders, who do not seem quite as ready for a woman in power.

After congratulating Braun for stepping up to become a candidate, Shapiro began the discussion with an overview of women’s achievements during the past two decades, while acknowledging progress has been slow in the political arena.

“As Americans we seem to want to believe—when it comes to the question of women’s achievement in society—that this is no longer even an issue,” said Shapiro. “If we are ever going to achieve real political parity, we must be willing to emerge from this information denial.”

The United States lags behind other countries in political representation by women, Shapiro said, noting that according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the United States ranks 57th among 181 countries in the number of women serving in Congress. Of the 435 representatives in the U.S. House of Representatives, 59 are women, and of 100 United States senators, only 14 are women.

“At the rate we’re going, the National Women’s Political Caucus predicts it will be another two centuries before women achieve political parity,” Shapiro said.

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—Judith Shapiro

“Like Ambassador Braun, I’m optimistic because a large percent of Americans polled say they’d love to vote for a woman for president,” Wilson said. “They just don’t know what women are out there largely because the media have not shown them the kind of authoritative women already in leadership.” And while many women leaders are not as visible in the media as men, Wilson believes that when they are, they are often seen through the lens of gender: that is, the media analyze their hair, clothes and how they interact with their husband.

In today’s political landscape, according to Clift, there will be pressure on the Democratic Party to put at least one woman’s name on its list to run with John Kerry as the vice presidential candidate, although she said it is unlikely that a woman would get the nomination. “Gender is a tricky issue in this race—as we saw with [Rep. Geraldine] Ferraro—and both parties are still feeling burned from that experience,” she said. Ferraro was the 1984 Democratic candidate for vice president on the national ticket with Walter Mondale, which was overwhelmingly defeated by Ronald Reagan.

Braun suggested that women are held to different standards and so are still relegated to second-class status in politics. Braun said that this is a disincen-
tive for women to pursue a polit-
career because the standards are different.

Clift responded: “I think women don’t go into politics because raising money is hard, they have family responsibilities, and the political climate in gener-
al is rough on anyone because of the public scrutiny. It’s not easy.”

Wilson believes personal atti-
tudes also come into play. “As a rule, we’re ambivalent about women who show such ambition,” Wilson said. “New research says that it’s not just money, work and family that keeps a woman from running for office. It’s the dampening of their political ambition when they look at male candidates; they often don’t think they can run well against a man. That’s why we need to encourage each other to run and to get involved.”

“For women, politics are per-
sonal, which leads to the funda-
mental question: why have women in government at all?” Braun asked. She went on to say that women bring unique perspec-
tives and skills to the political process, regardless of party affilia-
tion. They tend to be more practical in terms of problem solving as well as collaborative and inclusive by nature, and these attributes contribute to suc-
sessful leadership.


From left: Carol Moseley Braun, Marie Wilson, Eleanor Clift and Barnard President Judith Shapiro.

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