Lorena Nava Ruggero: Welcome to ViewPoints, a podcast where we speak to SDSU faculty experts about hot topics in the news. I’m Lorena Nava Ruggero your host. Today, we will be speaking on women in politics with political science professor Ronnee Schreiber and women's studies professor Kim Price. Ladies, welcome.

Ronnee Schreiber: Thanks for having us.

Kim Price: Thank you for having us.

LNR: Thank you for coming. In women and politics, it has been a big year in terms of the election; we had Hillary Clinton’s failed campaign for the White House and now we also have Sarah Palin as the VP nominee for the Republican party. And of course we have to start with the Saturday Night Live skit where we have Tina Fey and her scary resemblance to Sarah Palin and Amy Poehler as Hillary Clinton and we just have to start there. What do you think it said about the topic of sexism in America? And we’ll just start with Ronnee.

RS: Well I found the whole thing refreshing in some ways because it used humor to point out some of the flaws in the campaigns and in particular, frankly, highlights some of the things that I dislike about Sarah Palin; they did in a very humorous way. But I think what they pointed out very well was the differences in the way that people understood sexism when Hillary Clinton was running versus Sarah Palin who is running right now. So, when Clinton was running of course there were a lot of sexist comments about her made in the press and really it wasn’t taken very seriously and now all of a sudden with Sarah Palin it’s not only being taken seriously but the Republicans themselves are highlighting the aspect of sexism. I found that very interesting and it was done very well by the SNL crew in terms of that particular debate.

KP: I have to agree, you have to give kudos to Tina Fey, who could imagine she could’ve had that spot-on imitation of Sarah Palin? I would agree, in many ways humor is a great way to actually highlight important issues and I think it gave the issue of sexism an important spotlight on the national media, the national stage. Cause’ we’ve had people talk about this stuff in the independent media, the blogs and the feminist media. Just sort of your traditional media that were talking about the sexism that Hillary Clinton was facing when she was running for the Democratic nomination. You know talking about her “cankles” and her pant-suits and her “cackle,” she’s a “ball-buster,” the whole thing. You know there’s a Hillary Clinton nutcracker; you know the whole shebang.

I just find it interesting that now, you know that the Republicans have a woman on the ticket and then there are these comments about her, yeah know she’s like this rock star now, she comes onto the national stage and talks about how she’s
a great mother and how she’s a beauty queen. She’s the gun-totin, fishin’,
moose-burger eating soccer mom. She calls herself a hockey mom.

I just find it interesting how the Republicans who were the ones perpetuating the
sexism, now, not just Republicans, I mean there were Democrats doing it as well,
that you know they were perpetuating the kind of sexism that Hillary was facing,
but now they changed their tune when they have a woman on the ticket. And
they’re calling sexism, which I find quite funny and ironic; how all of a sudden
now they’re the champions of women’s issues. At least I can say that it has
brought up the issue and people are talking about taking it a little bit more
seriously. I’m not quite sure if we would’ve liked having it in the package that it
came in through the Republican mouthpiece, but that’s where we are right now.

RS: And also it’s not just that they brought up the issue of sexism which I think is
absolutely critical, but also I was listening to the national news this morning on
NPR and they had on the president of the National Organization for Women, Kim
Gandy, because the NOW political action committee has endorsed Obama,
which is no big surprise obviously a feminist group endorsing Obama, but the fact
that it made national news, “Morning Edition,” which is a big national news
program, I think that’s indicative of the fact that the issue of gender and politics
has made it back into the forefront.

With Hillary Clinton it was clearly there and then it seemed to go away when she
no longer was the nominee, so we didn’t hear anything about it anymore, and
then all of a sudden Palin brought it back in and in some ways it’s brilliant on the
part of the Republicans to have brought it in to this particular package, because
Palin is someone who does appeal to a number of women. Obviously, not a lot
of feminist women, but a lot of conservative women, a lot of women are very
active in the Republican party and she’s clearly someone who can, you know,
“rally the troops” in that way.

LNR: You make a good point about the role of conservative women. You just
wrote your book, or it just got published anyways and in terms of do you think
Sarah Palin is going to be a rallying cry for the women in the Republican Party
and will that actually mobilize people? Or is it just something that happens, the
same people make it to the polls, or do you think there is going to actually be
change in terms of who goes out on Election Day?

RS: I think it could certainly make a change. I think first of all, to answer the first
part of that, absolutely, it’s absolutely a rallying cry. I’ve already seen it because
I’ve been looking at the conservative women’s groups that I studied in my book
and they immediately had something about her on their websites about how she
represents them and “finally we have a women who represents us.” So, I think
they’re very excited by her and now they can finally say “look there are a lot of
conservative women and we promote women’s issues, but just not the same way
feminists do, so now she’s ours.” She’s obviously going to rally Republican
women who would have voted for McCain anyway if they chose to vote and I think now they certainly will.

But, there are a lot of undecided women who might see this as “oh ya’ know somebody who’s out there now representing me and she’s a strong woman, she can have a job and take care of all the babies, and so on, and take home the moose — exactly, forget the bacon she has the moose and she killed it herself. And so, I think in that sense there’s some kind of aspect that can at least tilt it especially in such a close election. You know, I really think she can have some kind of an impact in that way.

KP: I mean there is a change. I was reading about looking at women who have been making challenges to become president or vice president in the United States historically. And just reading about Geraldine Ferraro when she was running for VP back in 84’ on the Mondale ticket, how afterwards the analysis with part of the issue of them not winning, particularly with Geraldine Ferraro, was a lot of women felt intimidated by her because somehow she was like the supermom, the superwoman who could do it all. She had three children, but yet this is a woman who made it up the ranks of politics and you know made it on to the national scene as a VP nomination. And a lot of women looked at their own lives and said — this is not my analysis but this is what was talked about at the time — that somehow they felt that “I couldn’t possibly do something like that, I don’t recognize myself in her.”

I think with Palin, 20 years later, it’s a switch. Now you have a woman who may not necessarily seem as intimidating, she sort of presents herself as the “every woman.” And how being a mom, and being a hockey mom and all this other stuff I think a lot of women kind of relate to that even though it may sort of go counter to what they believe in. You still have people feeling that women who have small children shouldn’t be running for office or holding any kind of high power position just because you need to take care of your family first.

RS: You know what’s interesting about that too, Kim, is that she’s being spun as this “every woman” and she says well I’m just a hockey mom, well no, you’re also the governor. I mean, I know a lot of quote “soccer moms,” whatever they really are, they live in my neighborhood and they’re not governors. And so it’s this very interesting spin on her and that she’s promoting obviously herself and so is the McCain campaign in positioning her in a way to kind of be representative of “every woman” and it’s not that women couldn’t aspire to be that way or that she isn’t a good role model in some ways, but it’s a fascinating spin on her. Every woman from “small town America,” so there’s that kind of spin on the sort of culture war aspects that are going on in this country of “the elite” who don’t really understand the “small town America.”

KP: Right, the rugged frontier sort of like Alaska being the last frontier, so it’s still that American idea that she’s playing upon. Even though we’ve moved
further and further away from that idea. We are all living in towns and suburbs and cities. How many of us actually live in rural America?

**RS:** Right, right, absolutely. So I think that part plays into her image as well.

**LNR:** Well, I want to just roll back a little bit to something that Kim had mentioned in terms of you know her being a mom of so many children. You can see the role of gender bias because I don’t think that if she was a man that we would be talking about “is he a fit father when he’s trying to be VP and raising five children?” And she’s got this young child, what is the best explanation for that they’re using that as such a strong tactic at least in the Republican Party in terms of promoting her, is that going to back-fire on them you think? Or is that just their way of trying to appeal to their base in terms of conservatives?

**KP:** Actually, it worries me a little because if she fails, then in some way it could be symbolic of the failure of feminism in general. That “see we told you, you can’t do it all if you have children; maybe you should not be doing the high power thing, and maybe stay at home with your kids or at least have a job that has less responsibility.” That’s sort of one of my worries that I have about how this could play out, even though I do agree that there is to an extent, you shouldn’t be criticizing women for their choice in terms of families because we don’t scrutinize men in the same way.

**RS:** Right, I agree with you completely, we don’t. And certainly no one has asked Obama who is taking care of his children and he has two young daughters. Obviously, it is a complete double-standard and so that’s been articulated, but also wisely used by the McCain campaign, not the double-standard itself, but her motherhood is promoted. So if you listen to her speech that she gave at the convention, she started off, you know, “I’m a mother, I’m a wife,” and introduced all of her children and we saw the baby and we saw the baby again and again and again.

So you know, frankly, if you watch Michelle Obama’s speech, the same thing, I mean this is a very successful career woman and basically in her speech, and obviously she’s not running, she’s the first lady — or would be the first lady or hopefully will be the first lady — and she immediately just started talking about her role as a wife and as a mother and even those traditional roles had to come out. She softened what she was wearing and they all were wearing pink the next day, the kids also somehow lost their corn rows, which is another interesting thing, so they straightened their hair, which is also a racialized thing. I think gender is coming out in all sorts of interesting ways in these campaigns.

**LNR:** In terms of Nancy Pelosi being the first female speaker of the House and we had Hillary, and now we have Sarah, is this a change in terms of women’s involvement in politics? I mean, really there hasn’t been a huge percentage increase in terms of governmental representation by women at the congressional
level. It has been held pretty steady, in some of the research that I’ve seen, do you think this is indicative of change or is it again just a blip on the screen?

KP: I think it happens in spurts, because you have to remember in 1992 the “Year of the Woman,” where we had all these women who were winning seats in Congress and we had five women in the Senate. I mean that’s the most we’ve ever had at the time. So, I think it comes in spurts.

We had that big victory, including California being the first state to have two women serve as senators at the same time. And then it sort of kept steady. And then again the last election, people were fed up and we got more women into Congress and we got Nancy Pelosi. So, I think it happens in spurts, a little bit at a time. It’s not going to happen overnight, I mean nothing happens overnight. If you look at women winning the right to vote or even looking at the ERA, which 80-plus years and we still don’t have an ERA. It’s something that you sort of have to keep at; it’s not going to happen over night.

RS: Yeah, I think that’s absolutely true. And I think maybe what will happen is that it might spur more women to go into politics, so this might be something that encourages more women. I was a little concerned frankly before Sarah Palin, but right after Hillary Clinton was no longer in the race it might have the opposite effect. There was this clip circulating on YouTube by a group called the Women’s Media Center, I don’t know if you’ve seen this clip, but it’s called “Sexism Sells and We’re Not Buyin’ It.” And it was basically about five minutes of clips, a lot of which came from either Chris Matthews or Fox News or various other political commentators, and basically the outright blatant sexist comments they were making either about Hillary Clinton or to other professional women who they worked with. And I watched that and it made me a little bit uncomfortable not just because it was just so disturbing, but in that we do see that even though women when they run, they win and they can raise as much money as men, there aren’t that many women who are choosing to run. And I think that’s one of the reasons why, because they’re worried about this negative aspect of media coverage. And so I was little concerned after Hillary Clinton and so I’m kind of hoping that maybe after this whole thing plays out that possibly that won’t be the case.

KP: There’s also just issues of women even opting just to run for office because studies have been done that men are actually more likely to consider going into politics and women have all these reasons why they don’t, maybe because of family issues, maybe because they feel they aren’t qualified for it. They might feel like they’re not in the right professions to make them qualified, like if they were in law or in business or something like that. Or they just think that they wouldn’t possibly win anyways just because they’re a woman. And so you still have those hurdles even though we find more and more women going into politics there is still this resistance of looking at your life and seeing if this is something that you want to put yourself and your family through; where some
men think it is there God-given right and they know from an early age. I mean I remember when I was an undergraduate, all the men — cause I was a poli sci major as an undergrad — all of them were expecting to be running for office at some point and I was thinking "I'm not even sure if I want to be a lawyer."

**RS:** I think that's absolutely true. And like you said there's this perception that women aren't going to win when they run or they don't think they're viable. And somehow the media isn't getting out there that that's not accurate. And I actually just reviewed a book about this, it was media coverage of women running for president, and indeed the media do put forth this perception that women aren't viable or maybe they should run for vice president or various aspects of their relative competency for the job. And so the message is that they're not going to make it. Whereas, actually, when women run, they do win. So, it's not consistent at all. And I think it does bring us back to this current campaign; it will be interesting to see how the media coverage of both Clinton and Palin, actually, if it has any impact on how women consider whether or not they should run for office.

**LNR:** In terms of this, especially being a quote-unquote “banner year” for women’s involvement in politics I guess, do you think it will bring more quote-unquote “feminist issues” to the forefront? I mean healthcare has already been made an issue, kind of by both parties. Obama’s talked about education in various ways throughout his campaign. Do you think we're going to see more issues that are considered, like the nurturing issues? Those kinds of issues I guess coming more to the forefront. Or do you think it’s going to be the same old thing? I mean we are in the middle of a big financial crisis right now, so is it going to be more about the economy or will it be all of these different issues, and that’s just the same thing that it has always been I guess?

**KP:** Well if you look at the polls, I mean for women in particular, the economy is number one. I mean everybody’s worried about the economy and women in particular because women still rule the purse strings. They have the purse strings in the families; they’re the ones going to the grocery stores and shopping. They know how much things cost and how much money they need to make stretch. And so, the economy is an important thing and I think also the war in Iraq because they’re worried, I mean you have Sarah Palin as well, sending children, sons and daughters out there, so there are those issues, too. And there's always the stand-by sort of quote “women’s issues” such as reproductive rights, which there are many of us who are feminist-oriented or worried about it, because there is a serious threat to it and so trying to look at the candidates who’s going to do the least harm, I guess to say at this point.

**RS:** Well, there are a bunch of Supreme Court seats open. Or soon to be open with the next president. But I agree with you, I think that both campaigns are obviously polling people and the economy is obviously of the highest concern and I think the past few days’ events are just going to amplify that. And like you
said, the economy is a women’s issue. Now it will certainly help both campaigns to actually frame it that way and if they want to appeal to women, not just talk about economy largely speaking, but frame it to women as to why the economy—“we understand that the economy is a women’s issue and we understand that it effects women in these particular kinds of ways.” And I think if they’re successful in doing that, then I think it would certainly help Obama, frankly, to be able to reach out to people in that way specifically. Probably also McCain, but I think Obama is going to have to pick it up a little bit, particularly with Palin on McCain’s ticket.

LNR: Since you uttered Obama and Palin in the same sentence there, we have to mention…

RS: It’s just inevitable isn’t it?

KP: Here comes the pig in the room.

RS: Is this the lipstick thing? Okay we should have brought lipstick with us.

LNR: No, well he did make that comment on Palin that she’s just lipstick on the pig, the pig being McCain’s ticket in general, but is what he said inherently feminist or was it a slip or is it indicative that, you know, people are picking up on that comment? The media seems to be converging in so many ways on the idea of sexism now that Sarah’s on this ticket.

RS: Especially because McCain used the exact same thing to talk about Hillary Clinton’s healthcare plan in 2007. Somehow that just got let go. I don’t know exactly what he was using it in reference to. My understanding is it was just a broader thing about these two people calling themselves mavericks or reformers or whatever the heck that means — the original mavericks. You know, basically the people who are going to fight the Republican Party even though one of them has been part of the Republican establishment for 26 years in the Senate. So I think that, it obviously wasn’t, I mean the media picked up on it, but in part the media are picking up on it because the very finely tuned conservative media outlets made a big deal out of it. So that in and of itself became a news story, so Rush Limbaugh was picked up by the “Today Show” or something like that, criticizing it. So what became news was the conservatives making a big deal out of it, so then that just kind of amplifies the entire process of that particular comment, which he probably — if he thought about it — should not have made, but I’m almost convinced that it’s not what he meant.

KP: My understanding was it was actually in reference to McCain’s pig comment you know the year earlier. It wasn’t necessarily a direct response to Palin, but you know again, as I said, he could have been a bit more sensitive thinking things have changed, situations have changed, it might not have been the best phrase to use.
RS: No, especially because she used the lipstick term in her speech so people are obviously going to making connections between those two things, so he wasn’t thinking.

KP: It’s one thing for a person to make those self-deprecating comments about themselves; it’s another when someone else is making those comments.

RS: Absolutely, I think the Obama campaign hopefully is using…could use a little consulting on appealing to women more specifically at this point. Or dealing with these issues in a broader sense.

LNR: You made a good point about conservative media. You know the Drudge Report, is the influencer when it comes to media and he is very conservative on his webpage in terms of the way he frames his stories. What do you see the role of conservative media kind of changing now that…I mean are they going to be cheering Sarah on the whole time or do you think they’re going to pull the same sort of thing quote-unquote that they did with Hillary?

RS: Oh no. Not at all.

KP: They rally around her. I mean we had Bill O’Reilly actually come into Palin’s defense; he’s prime sexism. If you ever watched his show…

RS: Which is…it’s almost like a “Twilight Zone” episode.

KP: It’s like, okay, I don’t think I’m on the same planet.

RS: You know, I actually did an interview recently on a conservative radio show in Wyoming and, yes, it was fascinating experience and basically the first thing out of the mouth of the person doing the interview was yeah know, “Let’s talk about Sarah Palin. We love Sarah Paling out here in Wyoming because she represents all of our values, don’t you agree?” You know, and so she’s totally being spun that way and there’s not a lot of negative commentary about her from what I can see.

I mean, I know, this is not to say that all conservatives love her. And there certainly was concern; I mean we were talking about the mothering thing right? So there certainly was some concern being articulated about “why is she, you know, flying around with her water breaking and having all these babies and still working outside the home?” So there are some women that are articulating that, but that’s generally not the big spin that’s being put out there about her.

I think the conservative media outlets are just going to help the cause as they have. They’re the ones who came up with the flip-flop term when John Kerry was running. There’s a great documentary about how that term originated with
Fox News behind the scenes and then it just got promoted out there, and you know probably did Kerry in. I mean Kerry didn't do a particularly good job of addressing it, but I think that they're pretty savvy.

**LNR:** And I know that the conservative media or conservatives always go “the traditional media, the established media is all liberal,” so do you see a kind of role reversal in terms of liberal media criticizing Sarah the way that conservatives did Hillary? Do you think we’re going to see that, or do you think it’s going to be more moderate in terms of their reactions I guess, maybe?

**KP:** Actually, I think it’s changed things a little bit because now, because they both made the sexism claim, it’s going to be harder to criticize her because then they can construe any comment, negative comment you make about her. Whether, you are specifically looking at her record, it can be construed as being sexist. And that’s sort of how a legitimate concern could actually be spun out for political ends. Because now it’s like we can provide her with a [unrecorded] and so any criticism we can make we can just slide off because we can just charge people with being sexist.

**RS:** I think that’s probably accurate. It’ll be very interesting to watch the vice presidential debate and see how Biden deals with this.

**KP:** Yes, that will be something to watch, won’t it?

**RS:** It has not really been his forte in the past to address some of these issues. I mean he has been very good on some issues, just women’s issues in general in the Senate. But if anybody ever watched the, if you remember the clips of the Senate judiciary committee basically grilling Anita Hill about being sexually harassed by Clarence Thomas, you know he was there and he wasn’t exactly a big promoter of women’s rights during that particular time. At least the way that he was interacting with her, so hopefully he has learned something from that.

**KP:** Right, otherwise he can be construed as this “big bad guy” badgering this poor hockey mom, I mean that could be disastrous. It could be triumphant. Who knows?

**RS:** It’s really fascinating how there’s just this interesting, I don’t know, it has just been fascinating how when this particular Republican woman has come to the floor that these issues have kind of flipped around in this way and all of a sudden have mattered. You know in fact it just makes me think, I in some ways wish that the Republican Party had sooner taken on some of the feminist concerns because we would really be going quite far at this point.

**KP:** Right, we would actually have support from people in the Supreme Court.
LNR: Well, it seems like we could talk about this all night long, but unfortunately we’re going to have to end our podcast for now, but I do want to give you both the opportunity, is there any one last thing you’d like to share with our listeners in regards to women in politics in this very important election year? And we’ll just start with Ronnee I guess.

RS: Well, I guess the thing about Sarah Palin since we’ve been talking about her generally, is that as I articulated a little bit earlier, not to underestimate her appeal to some women. Because I think certainly feminists have been out there critiquing her as not being a feminist or not really representing women’s interests and I think it’s short-sighted of feminists to do that to some extent because she does represent a certain group of women in a way that those women feel very strongly about having her out there. And it’s important to not talk about those women, for example, as being like “pawns” of you know right wing men and so on. You know having said that, if feminists want to have some sort of glimmer of hope or affirmation or something, the other thing to keep in mind is that the Sarah Palin, her being nominated, does show that feminists have been successful in promoting that women are serious political actors. And so in that sense I think that’s a very significant aspect of what’s happening right now.

KP: Well I just think it’s a great moment in time because there is no turning back. We’ve had Hillary Clinton, you know, made it, almost a successful run to become the democratic nominee. We actually have an African-American man actually having the democratic nomination. And to be quite frank, I’m just sort of just shy of 40 and I was getting to the point where you know worried that in my lifetime that I wasn’t going to see an African-American, or another person of color or a woman, be taken seriously for this high-power position and so I actually have hope. I’ve had more hope then I’ve had in awhile so, um, you know there is no turning back, we can only go forward.

LNR: Well, thank you ladies again both so much for taking your time out of your busy schedules to speak with us. And that concludes the ViewPoints podcast on women in politics. Thank you.