

From Miss World to World Leader: Beauty Queens, Paths to Power, and Political Representations

Jill Carle, Arizona State University
Magda Hinojosa, Arizona State University

Abstract: This article argues that participation in beauty pageants can serve as a path to power for women. This previously unidentified route to political office is unique to women, builds on representational elements of beauty pageants, and provides girls and women with skills necessary to political achievement. We analyze how this path to power is different from celebrity politicians, which has recently received much academic attention. We use examples from Venezuela, Jamaica, the United States, and France to illustrate this path to power and differentiate between two types of beauty queens turned politicians.

Miss Universe 1981 announced her candidacy for the presidency of Venezuela in early 1998, after months of polling data already revealed that she was the clear front-runner. When asked about the applicability of her former pageant life to politics Irene Sáez cited the beauty contests of her youth as the source of her competitive spirit. Sarah Palin emerged as a national political figure in the United States when the McCain campaign announced her as the Republican vice-presidential candidate in the upcoming election. The focus on her looks and former beauty queen credentials was undeniable. Both of these women illustrate a previously unidentified path to power. Beauty queens have become members of Congress, like Representative Michele Bachmann and Senator Lisa Murkowski, and state governors, like Jennifer Granholm. These women and countless others like them in countries worldwide suggest that beauty queens may be able to trade titles like Miss Massachusetts for political titles like Governor of Massachusetts.

Despite the intense public attention that beauty pageant winners running for political office garner, no academic work addresses beauty queens and the possibility that pageants provide a pathway to power for women. Ballerino et al argue that the “failure to grant beauty pageants serious attention may reflect a reluctance to deal with beauty itself as a serious matter”—meaning that academics have failed to take note of this path to power for the same reasons that beauty queens have at times failed to attain political office: the association with beauty pageants costs them credibility (Ballerino Cohen et al. 1996:6).¹ While anthropologists and sociologists turn a critical lens to beauty contests because of what they reveal about societal norms, political science relegates discussion of beauty queens to footnotes in political biographies.

¹ Beauty pageants are frequently criticized for promoting patriarchal norms and objectifying women (Banet-Weiser 1999; Dow 2003). Others have criticized pageants for promoting immodesty in women: the Catholic Church long threatened pageant participants with ex-communication; more recently, pageant siting has been problematized due to protest by religious organizations in countries such as Nigeria. While we recognize the importance of feminist critiques of beauty pageants, our purposes are more modest. Our intent is simply to identify this as a potential path to power and to explicate how beauty pageants may allow women to hone skills relevant to politics. These skills can certainly be acquired, or practiced via other means (joining the debate club or volunteering for a political campaign).

We argue that participation in beauty pageants can serve as a path to power. This previously unidentified route to office is unique to women, builds on the representational elements of pageants, and provides girls and women with skills necessary to political achievement. We describe each of these elements in turn, before addressing how beauty queens turned politicians are different from celebrity politicians. We explain the potential ill effects of the “beauty bind” on former beauty contestants seeking to enter politics. We differentiate between two types of beauty queen politicians, celebrity and ancillary beauty queens. Through case studies, we suggest that celebrity beauty queens will find their pageant experience more helpful in transitioning to politics, not just highlighting their pageant experiences in their quest for office, but campaigning as former beauty queens. On the other hand, ancillary beauty queens may find it more challenging to translate their pageant experiences into office. Irene Sáez is an example of the celebrity category, and Sarah Palin of the ancillary category. We also describe the cases of Lisa Hanna of Jamaica (celebrity) and Eva Joly of France (ancillary).

Determining how many women have traveled this path to political office is not feasible. There are reasons for this: 1) some women probably run for office without their beauty pageant pasts coming to light; they may have competed only in local pageants; many years may separate their pageant experiences from their political campaigns; 2) some women with pageant pasts likely hide this part of their biographies. We likely observe only those women who run for high level office (in the Venezuelan case, this means national legislative office, a gubernatorial position, or presidency) and/or those women who obtained significant pageant titles (in the United States, this might mean a state win, or Miss America). Our inability to assess how many women worldwide fit into the category of beauty queen turned politician is unfortunate. However, even if few women access this route to power it would be worthy of study, given the relatively small numbers of women who enter politics. The evidence that we have though indicates that this path is not rare. Nearly 12% of female governors elected in the United States since 2000 participated in pageants. In the 2012 elections in the United States alone multiple former beauty queens entered the political arena.² Miss Vermont 2010 won a seat in the Vermont state senate and Miss Hawaii 2011 won a seat in Hawaii’s lower house. Shelli Yoder, former Miss Indiana, contested a congressional seat, ultimately losing to the incumbent representative. Miss America 2003 garnered press attention, but lost her party’s nomination for a congressional seat in Indiana.

Although the thousands of beauty pageants³ across the globe vary, “most have a familiar, recognizable format: female contestants enter a competitive event, where they are judged based on beauty, personality, talent, and the ever so elusive ‘poise’. A panel of judges evaluates each contestant, and the woman who garners the most points in the various events of the pageant—often including swimsuit, evening gown, talent, and interview competitions—wins and is crowned ‘queen’” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 31). Beauty contests have a lengthy history, but modern pageants emerged during World War II “when they became patriotic and respectable...symboliz[ing] a shift in contests away from their side-show roots and toward professionalism, careers, scholarships, and a definition of beauty that included deportment and citizenship” (Ballerino Cohen et al. 1996: 4).

The reach of pageants is undeniable: more than 78 nations send contestants to the Miss Universe pageant and in 2008 this event reached an audience of over one billion people (www.missuniverse.com). The Miss World webpage indicates that 2.3 billion people watched their 2000 pageant (www.missworld.com). The International Directory of Pageants lists over 3,000 pageants worldwide.

The political importance of pageants is evident when considering clearly political events staged at pageants: the 1968 protest against Miss America in the United States, which some argue was the beginning of second-wave feminism; indigenous pageants in Guatemala, which regularly include strong

² We believe other women with beauty pageant pasts likely competed in the 2012 elections. For the reasons already noted, it is impossible for us to present a complete list.

³ While today, the word pageant evokes thoughts of young women in sashes and swimsuits, prior to the 1920s, female pageants were put on by women’s suffragists. (Hamlin 2004).

pronouncements by contestants against social discrimination towards indigenous populations; the death threats lobbied by Nicaraguan rebels against the Nicaraguan Miss Universe competitor; or the protests by contestants at the Miss World 1976 pageant over South Africa's apartheid policies (Banet-Weiser 1999; McAllister 1996; Rodríguez 2005; Ballerino Cohen et al. 1996). Pageants have also instigated political controversy. In 1977, the United Nations boycotted the Miss World competition because of continued participation by apartheid-era South Africa. Later, India's desire to host the Miss World pageant inspired protests from the political left and right, all of whom believed the event was "a symbol of global consumerism and an affront to Indian culture" (<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/nigeria/2000s.html>). In 2002, Nigeria was hosting the Miss World pageant. Muslims rioted, killing over 200, after a newspaper suggested that the Prophet Mohammed would have married a Miss World competitor. Ultimately the pageant was relocated to Great Britain (<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/nigeria/2000s.html>).

Despite their substantial emphasis on appearance, beauty pageants are often billed as more about brains than bikinis, and a philanthropic source. For example, the Miss World contest "prides itself on being more than a beauty contest" (Van Esterik 1996: 210). The pageant boasts of its "Beauty with a Purpose" program, which has raised more than half a billion dollars for charity (missworld.com). Part of a broader effort to revive the pageant, the Miss World competition simultaneously added personality and intelligence segments to its pageants to provide more gravitas (<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/nigeria/1980s.html>). Beauty pageants in the United States emphasize their role as an enormous source of college scholarship money for young women—the Miss America pageant was described in the 1970s as "easily, the most benevolent office in the world for the distribution of college scholarships to women" (Deford 1971: 160). It continues to be the largest single source of scholarships for girls and young women (Banet-Weiser 1999).

The sections that follow explain how this path to power is different: first of all, it is unique to women; secondly, it has representational overtones that pave the way for political careers; and finally, it encourages the development of a set of skills necessary for politicians.

Unique to Women

Using beauty pageants as a stepping stone to politics is a path to power available cross-nationally and exclusively to women. Examples of beauty queens entering politics are available worldwide. Angelina Sondakh (Indonesia), Eunice Olsen (Singapore), Tanja Saarela (Finland), Mara Carfagna (Italy), Gemma Garrett (Great Britain), Maria Kalaw Katigbak (Philippines), and Yolanda Pulecio (Colombia) are but a few well-known examples of this phenomenon.

Beauty pageants themselves are overwhelmingly restricted to women. Beauty contests for men are rare, although transvestite contests have become more common in the Philippines, Thailand, (Van Esterik 1996) and Tonga (Besnier 2002). The Mr. Universe competition is not analogous to a beauty pageant, since it is a sporting contest (bodybuilding). It does not share elements common to beauty pageants, such as judgments of personality, talent, or public speaking.⁴ The Mr. Personality contest that takes place in the British Virgin Islands is most similar to beauty pageants: it includes a swimsuit competition (indicating that men are not judged solely on personality) and a talent portion. While some male politicians have gained attention for their looks, beauty pageants have not been a path to power for men.⁵

⁴ Arnold Schwarzenegger may be the most famous Mr. Universe. Schwarzenegger leveraged his win to build a successful career as an actor, and then entered politics. This trajectory may appear similar to what we describe. However, the Mr. Universe competition neither teaches the skills we outline, nor provides a similar representational role.

⁵ Voted *Cosmopolitan* magazine's "Sexiest Man" in 1982, former U.S. Senator Scott Brown proves to be an exception; clearly, however, the *Cosmopolitan* competition is not analogous to pageants.

A Different Type of Representing

Beauty queens have “represented” a town, state or nation paving the way for political careers: Miss Kansas becomes the Senator from Kansas. Hanna Pitkin argued that beauty queens served a purely symbolic role: “a good symbol need by no means be a good representative when we want activity on our behalf. No matter how enthusiastic we might be about Miss California, few of us would want to elect her to Congress” (1972: 142). While some may agree with Pitkin’s sentiment and may be unwilling to cast their own ballots for beauty queens, there is abundant evidence that voters do elect beauty queens to political office. We believe that beauty queens are often able to serve as political representatives because of their prior representational role.⁶ While we argue that this symbolic role is a significant element of this path to power, others have noted how symbolic acts can be transformed into political power. For example, Fleschenberg notes that moral capital, an important means of obtaining political power for women in Asia, can be obtained in part through “appropriate symbolism, e.g. political speeches at commemorative places or dates” (2008: 237).

Beauty queens are often viewed as representative of the best of what a city or nation has to offer (King-O’Riain 2008). The rise of candidate-centered politics facilitates the transformation of this symbolic representational role into a political one. Observed worldwide, politics are more candidate-centered as a result of declining partisan ties and more forms of mass communications (see for example, Maniago 2007 and Dalton 2000). Consequently, fewer voters approach elections with standing predispositions, increasing the salience of candidate traits on vote choice (Dalton, McAllister and Wattenberg 2000). This provides an opportunity for beauty queens to showcase skills obtained from pageants.

The representational aspect of beauty queens’ rise to power is heavily intertwined with ideas of nationalism and national pride. Beauty contests have often been used for political purposes, particularly as patriotic mechanisms. The 1943 Miss America pageant was an opportunity to sell war bonds; the winners of these pageants often traveled with the United Service Organizations to entertain troops (Schofield 2004). Beauty contests in Thailand have been credited with attempting to build mass nationalism (Van Esterik 1996) and turning attention away from dictatorship (Supatra 1987 cited in Van Esterik 1996).

Pageants themselves are often used as a way to transmit messages to the international community. Some have characterized Turkish beauty pageants as an attempt to craft a modern identity. These “were exercises in nationalism and the projection of a “modern,” positive national image” (Shissler 2004: 112). Similarly, Indian pageants were described as “symbols to ‘convince’ the world at large that India had ‘arrived’ on the global stage as a ‘modern’ country on its path to ‘development’” (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 206). In the Soviet Union, beauty pageants were “confirmation of the break with the ‘stagnant’ past” (Waters 1993: 118).

International pageants can also serve to convey nationhood and autonomy. Spain regularly blocks Gibraltar’s participation in international competitions. Free to participate in the Miss World competition, this particular contest is an opportunity for Gibraltar to represent itself as a nation (Haller 2000). In addition to building up national identity, these contests can also be important internationally for nation-states.

Beauty queens themselves serve as a symbolic political representative. Beauty queens have often noted these representational elements. As one woman explained: “When I awoke this morning I realized that I’m Miss Venezuela. I’m no longer Carolina Indriago... I’m Venezuela” (Rodríguez 2005: 183). A young woman dons a sash that proclaims her to be Miss Estonia; symbolically, she now represents the

⁶ While it is outside the scope of this paper to examine how beauty queens might govern once in office, we have no reason to believe that they would exercise power differently than other women. Some readers may be concerned that beauty queens may not be able to gain real power because they have been placed into their positions due to their beauty queen credentials. This would be less plausible in elected rather than appointed positions given the often rigorous campaign process. Moreover, while some may see these women as less credible because of their beauty, this occurs even for women not associated with beauty pageants (Heldman, Carroll and Olson 2005; Murray 2010).

values and virtues of the nation. Though pageant winners may not do much of political consequence for their constituents, in many cultural contexts they provide a point of national pride. This gives them some understanding of representing their fellow citizens to a broader audience.

If You Can Do It In A Swimsuit: The Skills That Beauty Pageants Require

“You have 20 seconds to be out onstage in a swimsuit,” she says, explaining that the self-confidence needed to pull that off is not unlike the public presence a politician needs to make good impressions on voters and constituents in a limited amount of time. “You have to be very comfortable with yourself, and very comfortable putting yourself in an awkward situation and coming out gracefully.”

--Miss District of Columbia 2006 (Kitto 2008)

Beauty pageants can serve to develop skills among young women that prove useful in a variety of career paths, particularly in politics. Pageants emphasize public speaking skills, poise under pressure, the solicitation of financing, the development of an issue platform, and self-confidence.

The girls and young women that participate in pageants “learn that they will be judged on the basis of their verbal performance” (Stoeltje 1996: 25). Contestants believe that honing their speaking skills will be “an invaluable skill for any future career” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 94). A former Miss Kansas argued that her role required her to be “a marketing director, public relations director, business development director, booking agent, advocate, professional entertainer, and public speaker all rolled into one” (Damast 2011: np). Public speaking is highly valued in politics. While girls and women could certainly gain these same public speaking skills and use them more regularly by joining the debate club, this is nonetheless one venue for developing these skills. Not only must pageant contestants display their public speaking skills (the infamous youtube video of Miss Teen South Carolina contestant notwithstanding), they are also trained to provide answers that others want to hear—a skill typically honed in politics.⁷

At the highest levels, beauty pageants are also televised. To win, contestants must successfully brand and market themselves to a large audience with an eye on the judges they seek to impress (Damast 2011). Moreover, pageant participants must seek financial support from their communities in order to participate in these contests. This ability to seek funding to cover entrance fees and pageant essentials would easily translate into campaign fundraising.

Pageant contestants are also often required to develop an issue platform, and to spend volunteer time working on this issue. Contestants are judged on this issue platform, “measured by the size, funding, and longevity of the particular volunteer organizations” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 43). The selection of an issue, the dedication of time and effort to educating themselves and formulating their ideas on the topic, and ultimately the presentation of this issue are readily applicable to the world of politics. While these platforms are often noncontroversial, contestant platforms can advocate more divisive platforms including gay rights and reproductive rights for women (missuniverse.com). Additionally, these issue platforms are often accompanied by advocacy work, providing women with the opportunity to champion their cause by raising awareness and funds.

Pageant winners must serve as representatives for a year; more important contests, such as the Miss America pageant, require that winners engage in a year’s worth of events and significant travel. Miss Universe 1981 said, “When I won, I became an ambassador....My life changed completely. I met representatives of the political world and started to feel that I needed to study Political Science.” (Rodríguez 2005: 137). The events these women participate in are often much like functions attended by politicians: they speak to schoolchildren, meet with representatives of organizations related to their issue

⁷ Some may argue that the stock answers that beauty queens provide when facing pageant questions will not suffice in politics. Certainly, if we were to believe that all beauty queens are vapid, then the lack of substance in campaign rhetoric benefits beauty queens.

platform, and attend charity events. These beauty queens are often invited to meet with political leaders; for example, Nelson Mandela invited Miss World 1993 to attend his inauguration and Miss America met with First Lady Barbara Bush to discuss her literacy program. Furthermore, pageant winners are expected to represent their cities, states, or countries: “The woman who represents a small town needs to be equipped to sell the town to a visitor... or to prove herself worthy of the town in emotional and moral terms” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 101). These young women are expected to promote the localities they represent, not unlike public officials.

One of the most valuable skills obtained through pageant participation is self-confidence. Young women who participate in beauty pageants may have higher self-confidence (i.e. leading them to enter beauty contests) or the process of participating in pageants may improve their confidence, perhaps because of the skills that pageants emphasize.⁸ Lawless and Fox (2005) argue that the most substantial barriers to women’s representation in the United States are present in the recruitment process; when women run, they win, but finding women willing to run is a challenge. Despite having better qualifications overall women are less likely to see themselves as qualified to run for office and self-select out of the potential candidate pool (Lawless and Fox 2005). Research from Latin America finds that women are reticent to self-nominate (Hinojosa 2012). Pageant participation may allow women to overcome confidence issues and/or convince them that they are qualified for political office. .

From Beauty Queen to Politician: Not Just Celebrity Politics

Joseph Estrada went from successful film actor to president of the Philippines; George Weah unsuccessfully tried to transition from international soccer star to president of Liberia; Ronald Reagan transformed from Hollywood star to governor and then President of the United States. We argue that beauty queens turned politicians may appear similar to celebrity politicians, but should be recognized as a separate category.

Recent literature on celebrity politicians highlights the multiple meanings of this term. In referring to celebrity politicians, we do not mean the treatment of politicians as celebrities, as with Barack Obama in 2008. There is an important distinction too between a political celebrity (i.e. Bono or Angelina Jolie) and celebrity politicians (i.e. Schwarzenegger), those who have traded in their celebrity for political office (Higgins and Drake 2006).⁹ Our discussion is limited to the latter. Street defines celebrity politicians as: “An elected politician... whose background is in entertainment, show business or sport, and who trades on this background (by virtue of the skills acquired, the popularity achieved or the images associated) in the attempt to get elected.” (2004: 437). This is not a new phenomenon (see Canon 1990).

How do celebrities transform their fame into political capital? Celebrity status affects the ability to gain media attention, but “political success requires qualities beyond a famous name and celebrity background” (West and Orman 2003). Celebrity status also signals “outsider status” (Tindall and Hart 2009), which often proves electorally attractive. The rise of candidate-centered politics, previously

⁸ This is a testable hypothesis. Researchers could survey young beauty queens and similar female high school students to determine whether this group is more political knowledgeable, interested, or efficacious than their peers.

⁹ How does the increase in celebrity politicians affect politics? There is no agreement “on the implications of the ‘celebritization’ of politics, with some scholars viewing it negatively as the victory of spectacle over substance and others treating it positively as potentially attracting more citizens to become politically engaged” (McKernan 2011: 201). For some, the celebrity politicians signal the defeat of substantive politics by a politics of personality (Gramson 1994 as cited in McKernan 2011: 197). So prevalent is this view, that politicians have used the “celebrity” label to defame opponents: McCain questioned Obama’s credibility by comparing him to Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. West and Orman 2002 “argue that the rise of celebrity politics has seen the displacement of traditional political skills (bargaining, compromise) and their replacement by those of media management and fundraising.” (Street 2004: 440).

mentioned, is advantageous to outsiders. Schaffer argues that “relying on name and fame to win the support of voters...is often employed by the likes of entertainment and sports celebrities, well-known activists, and members of powerful families” (Schaffer 2007: 50).

Celebrities must also have personal appeal. Indian film stars are said to “actively fashion political personas through the characters they portray, in order to route their transition from screen to political stage” (Mukherjee 2004: 81; see also Dickey 1993). One well-known example of a celebrity politician is Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger highlighted his movie career by using trademark phrases from his movies like “I’ll be back” in his political campaigning and titling his autobiography Total Recall.

While the absence of strong parties could create a situation in which voters would look to personal appeal to make voting decisions, political parties often propose celebrities because it is “easier to market political choices to voters through a familiar personality” (McAllister 2007: 580). Maniago (2007) asserts that in the Philippines the national voting system benefits celebrities running for office; furthermore, the use of write-in ballots and stage names is favorable to celebrities.¹⁰

Beauty queens may use these same tools to leverage their titles into political offices. Like celebrity politicians, they can use media attention to amass name recognition and political notice.¹¹ Beauty queens too may use their status to build up personal appeal. Parties may propose beauty queens because, like other types of celebrities, they may be recognizable brands that will attract voters. While television stars, sports personalities, and other entertainment figures have entered politics, the beauty queens turned politicians have forged a new path to power.

The Beauty Bind

Is being pretty enough to compete in a beauty contest a political liability? The political science literature often characterizes appearance as a double bind for female candidates, “either trivialized for being pretty or ostracized for being plain” (Murray 2010: 13). This literature, however, predominantly emerges from studies of the United States and other Western advanced industrialized countries. To more completely understand whether beauty queens in various national contexts face a beauty bind, we require a global examination of these phenomena, as we explain shortly.

Former beauty queens involved in politics may have more attention focused on their appearance, which could harm their credibility when seeking office. Greater female beauty translates into decreased political image, indicating that beauty comes with a political price (Rosenberg et al 1991). More beautiful women are seen as hyper-feminine and therefore less political, while the inverse is true for men: more attractive men are perceived as being better suited for politics (Bowman 1984; Rosenberg et al 1991). Moreover, female attractiveness is problematic for women candidates because of the persistence of the “smart/attractive dichotomy”: beautiful women cannot be intelligent (Heldman, Carroll et al. 2005; Murray 2010: 16). Women who are able to attract attention because of their beauty credentials may face a double-edged sword; while their pageant pasts may provide some fame that can translate into political capital, their physical beauty may cast doubts about their suitability for politics.

Though their appearance may harm their political credibility, former beauty queens may obtain more media coverage because of the newsworthiness of their pageant past. However, the emphasis on a candidate’s hairstyle or her pantsuits means less attention to the issues: ultimately, “It is...harder for a woman to get her message across if it is buried under comments about her hairstyle” (Murray 2010: 12-13). Although this coverage increases candidates’ name recognition, voters may get less substantive candidate information.

¹⁰ Indeed, celebrity politicians are common in the Philippines. Media celebrities comprised between 17% and 25% of congressmembers from 1992-2007 (Maniago 2007).

¹¹ Name recognition can also be obtained through familial relationships. Kinship is a powerful path to politics for women. Men are also heavily advantaged by familial relationships, but women are often presumed to have made it into politics *because* of their kinship ties (Hinojosa 2012; see also Jalalzai 2004).

While beauty queens' appearance may negatively affect their transition into politics, perceptions of beauty in politics likely vary across cultural contexts. The existing literature on beauty and electability overwhelmingly focuses on the United States, but cultural views of beauty and femininity may lead to different outcomes for beauty queens entering politics elsewhere. In Southeast Asian cultures, beauty often equates with power: "Possession of radiant beauty is evidence of legitimate power...politicians are admired for their beauty" (Van Esterik 1996: 205). For example, in the Philippines, "So readily can beauty translate to female power that beauty queens are invariably approached by party leaders who urge them to run for national office" (Roces 1998: 172). Similarly, the number of Italian beauty queens that have entered politics may indicate a proclivity to beauty pageant winners, likely because feminine beauty is a common cultural reference (Gundle 1999). National differences in receptivity to beauty queens will influence women's ability to use this pathway to power.

Much like perceptions of beauty, attitudes toward pageants vary across cultures.¹² In some countries, pageants and beauty queens are a source of pride, representing important cultural virtues. Pageants in India have become well-respected affairs that reaffirm both femininity and nationhood (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003). Similarly, beauty pageants in Venezuela play an important role in national identity (Acosta-Alzuru 2010; Dinneen 2001; Lee 2009). Not all countries share these positive attitudes toward pageants. While an emphasis on cultural virtues like femininity can lead to positive views of pageants (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003), a focus on equality for women often sours national attitudes toward beauty pageants. In a number of countries from Nepal to the United States, public opinion toward beauty pageants often focuses heavily on concerns about the objectification and commercialization of women (Banet-Weiser 1999; Crawford et al. 2008). These variations in public attitudes toward pageants more broadly may influence beauty queen's ability to transfer their experience into political office.¹³

National differences in receptivity to beauty queens might allow us to understand how women who have won such contests campaign politically. For example, Senator Maria Kalaw Katigbak of the Philippines emphasized her beauty queen credentials (Carnival Queen 1931) in her campaign advertisements by using the slogan *She Has Beauty, She Has Brains* (Roces 1998). Other beauty queens, however, have attempted to separate themselves from their former pageant experience. Miss America 1945 stopped answering any questions about her experience in pageants after entering politics presumably because "the beauty title may have become, in her view, an embarrassment to her new dignity" (Deford 1971: 161). Other former beauty queens may seek out important positions to prove that beauty and brains do co-exist. Jennifer Hosten-Craig, who became Miss Grenada in 1970, went on to become High Commissioner to Canada: "Afterwards I wanted to prove I wasn't just a pretty face" (*The Mirror*, 11/29/00).

In the discussion that follows we explain that there are two types of beauty queens turned politicians. We elaborate on these types, before presenting case studies to exemplify each of the types.

Two Types of Beauty Queens Turned Politicians

We argue that there are two different categories of beauty queens turned politicians: celebrity and ancillary. Both types acquire the skills previously described through pageant participation. In addition, celebrity beauty queens successfully develop broad name recognition and symbolically represent their nation. The fame and experience gained by serving as a "representative" of their nation allows them to translate their pageant pasts into politics. This category of beauty queen politician is exemplified by Irene Sáez. Here, beauty queen status translated into the political capital necessary to contest political office.

¹² The scholarship on pageants certainly demonstrates understandings about various definitions of beauty across the globe (see for example Wilk 1995 on Belize and Waters 1993 on the Soviet Union).

¹³ Much like differences in definitions of beauty, the literature on national perceptions of pageants suggests that varying cultural dynamics lead to differing roles for local and national beauty pageants across countries.

Ancillary beauty queens develop the skills gained from pageant experience (public speaking, fundraising, crafting issue platforms, maintaining poise under pressure, and gaining self-confidence) which may aid future candidacies. But ancillary beauty queens often are more limited in their acquisition of these skills than celebrity beauty queens, either because their participation in pageants is limited to smaller events (i.e. perhaps only winning local titles) or because their pageant experience took place in a culture less receptive to beauty queens (i.e. where it would be nearly impossible to become a household name after a major pageant win). Furthermore, ancillary beauty queens lack the name recognition and experience of “representing” that typifies the celebrity beauty queens. The lack of broad name recognition makes it less likely that these beauty queens will be known broadly for their pageant past. This second type is exemplified by Sarah Palin. For Palin, being a beauty queen might have provided some benefits, but this would have been insufficient to gain office; i.e. it would have been unlikely that she would have gone directly from beauty queen to governor (or even to mayor).

The cultural context within which a former beauty queen attempts to move into politics plays a substantial role in determining whether she will become a celebrity or ancillary beauty queen. Celebrity beauty queens are likely to emerge in nations with a more favorable view of pageants, while nations in which pageants are less well respected may produce ancillary beauty queens. In some contexts, pageants are important national events and both pageants and contestants receive substantial media coverage. Where beauty queens do not obtain much media coverage they are unlikely to become celebrity beauty queens. When the public views pageants with great respect, they are more likely to see beauty queens as credible public figures. Where pageants are viewed less favorably, beauty queens may have more difficulty gaining credibility, encouraging these women to distance themselves from pageants. We suggest that celebrity beauty queens transitioning into politics can obtain political power *because* of their previous participation in beauty pageants, while ancillary beauty queens often obtain political power independent of their beauty queen pasts (their pageant credentials may even prove detrimental to their candidacies). Similarly, we posit that celebrity beauty queens will be more likely to use their beauty queen status in their political advertisements. Finally, we suggest that celebrity beauty queens may quickly transform from beauty queen to politician, while ancillary beauty queens will have a longer road because they are unable to campaign as beauty queens. Moreover, different cultural views of pageants and the women that participate in them may affect a beauty queen’s ability to win office.

In the following section of this paper, we briefly discuss four beauty queens turned politicians: Irene Sáez (Venezuela), Lisa Hanna (Jamaica), Sarah Palin (United States), and Eva Joly (France). The four cases not only represent four different national contexts, but different types of pageants and different end results. Case studies provide us with the best opportunity to highlight the differences and commonalities between the types of beauty queens across countries in order to address our expectations.¹⁴ By addressing the varying national contexts in which beauty queens transition to politics, we evaluate the prevalence of beauty queen politicians and begin to examine the conditions that make this a pathway to power.

Irene Sáez

Irene Sáez became Miss Venezuela and then Miss Universe in 1981 at the age of 19. After serving as Miss Universe, Sáez enrolled at the prestigious Central University of Venezuela and studied political science. She later ran for mayor of the municipality of Chacao, the wealthiest municipality in the country and part of the capital city. She was easily re-elected. Sáez had garnered tremendous support as mayor, and had gained a reputation for being an honest and effective politician. When Sáez announced her bid for the presidency of Venezuela in early 1998, she led in the polls, ahead of a dozen male competitors.

¹⁴ Though media analyses are useful in understanding how the media portray beauty queens in politics, analyzing media coverage does not suit our purposes here. The cases provide sufficiently different cultural and political contexts as to make a media analysis across countries problematic. We instead refer the reader to sources listed in the works cited page which offer rich case studies of a number of beauty queens turned politicians.

Twelve months later, Sáez finished a distant third in the elections, with only 3.1 percent of the vote.¹⁵ Following her defeat, Sáez ran for governor of Nueva Esparta, winning with more than 70% of the vote, despite criticisms that she had never lived in the state. She later resigned her post due to pregnancy. Sáez has not returned to politics.

Media coverage of Sáez regularly turned to her appearance and her role as a former beauty queen. Newspaper coverage of the election referred to Sáez as a Barbie doll, as an ex-Miss Universe, as the blonde, and, in one column, as Miss Narcissist. Columnist Ibsen Martínez announced that he would not vote for Sáez “because she’s not my type of blonde” (*El Universal*, 7/15/98). One column quoted Marcial Mendoza Estrella, president of a small political party, who commented that Sáez is “a beautiful 37 year old woman who could once again compete in a beauty pageant, but should not run for the Presidency of the Republic” (*El Universal*, 7/15/98).

While Sáez tried to keep the media focused on her message rather than her looks, popular style magazines published extensive reports on her political rise that “frequently included brief notes about her trip or attendance to international social events” (Montero 2000: 54). The emphasis on the beauty queen’s appearance proved problematic to her candidacy; initially, Sáez may have benefitted from the media attention, but ultimately the focus on her looks diverted attention from political issues (see Hinojosa 2010).

How does Sáez fit this newly identified path to power? Sáez is an example of a celebrity beauty queen. She had tremendous name recognition; according to one of her campaign managers (Personal Interview with de la Cruz, 7/23/99), two years before the election, Sáez’s name recognition rates reached 98% and vote intention rates neared 50%, far outpacing her closest competitors. Her exceptional start in the polls was in many ways a reflection of her star power. Sáez’s glory as Miss Universe 1981 was a source of pride for Venezuelans, and her strong early showing demonstrated her ability to translate her status as Miss Venezuela into a serious presidential bid.

Scholars agree that beauty pageants have “retained much of their appeal and prestige in Venezuela” (Dinneen 2001: 59). Finol explains that during the Miss Venezuela pageant “the streets of the cities are left semi-deserted” as Venezuelans huddle around their televisions to watch the competition (Finol 1999: 105). The appeal of the beauty queens is substantial. This cultural affection for beauty pageants (Acosta-Alzuru 2010; Dinneen 2001; Lee 2009) enabled Sáez to transfer her experience as a beauty queen into political office. Venezuelan achievements in the Miss World and Miss Universe pageants have come with “worldwide publicity” (Dinneen 2001: 59). According to some, “the Miss Venezuela pageant is close to a national industry, a precious natural resource, like oil, to be developed and sold abroad for the enrichment of the nation” (Edmondson 2009: 124). The name recognition and representational experience accrued as a result of Venezuelan attitudes toward beauty queens allowed Sáez to gain political office. While she was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving the nation’s highest office, she nevertheless translated her accomplishments in the pageant world into politics.

Lisa Hanna

In 1993, 18 year old Lisa Hanna won the Miss Jamaica pageant and was crowned Miss World. Hanna received B.A. and M.A. degrees in communication from the University of the West Indies before embarking on a brief career in the media. Hanna never held political office before being selected as a candidate to parliament by the People’s National Party of Jamaica. Hanna had extensive volunteer experience, having worked with various organizations aimed at eliminating hunger since she was a child, and had gained some familiarity with politics because of her beauty queen status: she was invited by

¹⁵ The candidate that ultimately won the 1998 elections was Hugo Chávez. Gender stereotypes were quite salient in these elections (see Hinojosa 2010 for details).

Nelson Mandela to attend his historic inauguration and was appointed a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador.

Hanna was elected to represent the South East St. Ann district (winning 7,134 votes to her competitor's 4,456) and took office in 2007, but not without controversy. While it was reported that Hanna was handpicked by Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller, the decision to include Hanna as a candidate was questioned by voters in the district who noted that Hanna neither lived nor worked in the district (<http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/803199>, August 2010). Criticism was leveled at the Prime Minister for her choice, which was described as “‘inept at best’, and...reportedly led to a breakdown of trust between the party hierarchy and ‘comrades on the ground’” (*The Jamaica Gleaner* 6/7/07). However, most criticisms concerned the Prime Minister's decision to choose a candidate without consulting the district's leadership (*The Jamaica Gleaner* 6/7/07).

Hanna's beauty queen credentials were noted. Former Prime Minister Patterson argued that Jamaicans should not “‘simply dismiss (her) because she happens also to be a beautiful person.” (*The Jamaica Gleaner* 6/7/07). *The Jamaica Gleaner* stated, “‘Most Jamaicans will peg their first memory of her back to 1993” when she won both the Miss Jamaica and Miss World titles (*The Jamaica Gleaner* 9/23/2007). *The Weekly Gleaner* described her former pageant experience as a positive, noting: “‘She is no stranger when it comes to representing her country, as in 1993, she won the Miss Jamaica World title and then the coveted Miss World title in the same year.” (*The Weekly Gleaner* 9/13-19/2007). Hanna continues in politics. In 2011, she was appointed Minister of Youth and Culture. Hanna shared Sáez's celebrity status. Pageants are a source of pride in Jamaica and Hanna was extraordinarily well-known for her turn as Miss Jamaica and Miss World. She was the third Jamaican to win Miss World.

Described as “‘a country intoxicated by the drama of beauty pageants”, Jamaica takes tremendous gratification in its beauty pageant winners. Succinctly stated, “‘the idolatry that surrounds winning Caribbean beauty queens is dramatic” (Barnes 1997: 302). In this country, the winner of Miss World pageant saw her image emblazoned on the nation's postage stamps and was “‘given the keys to the city of Kingston, the second woman up to that date”, after Queen Elizabeth II (Barnes 1994: 488). In Jamaica, beauty queens are seen as national representatives; Miss Jamaica “‘needs validation from the nation's subjects because of her representational status—she goes on to represent Jamaica at an international beauty pageant and hence is to be the embodiment of all that *is* Jamaican” (Barnes 1997: 292).¹⁶ By gaining experience in beauty pageants on an international stage, Hanna gained the celebrity needed to catch the attention of the party elite that ultimately supported her candidacy. For Hanna, this national fervor for beauty pageants and beauty queens led to political opportunities that may not have been available in a less accommodating cultural context.

Sarah Palin

Sarah Palin won the Miss Wasilla Pageant in 1984 and finished second in the Miss Alaska Pageant.¹⁷ She attended a number of colleges before receiving a degree in communications from the University of Idaho in 1986. She worked as a sportscaster in Alaska, prior to launching her political career.

Sarah Palin entered local politics in 1992, first serving two terms on the Wasilla, Alaska city council before winning the mayoral seat for the first time in 1996. In 2002, Palin unsuccessfully participated in the Republican primary for the Alaska lieutenant governor seat, and was later appointed to the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission. Elected governor in 2006, she was tapped to be

¹⁶ Barnes 1994 crafts a compelling argument about the representational nature of this relationship given the country's racial politics.

¹⁷ The woman who beat out Sarah Palin for the Miss Alaska title unsuccessfully tried to get elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 2010.

McCain's running mate in August 2008, eventually losing the November 2008 election. Palin resigned as Governor of Alaska in July 2009.

Sarah Palin fits the category of ancillary beauty queen. Palin was not widely known for earning first runner-up in a state pageant. Palin was not only unfamiliar to Americans as a former beauty queen, she was barely known for her political experience: 71% of Americans had never heard of or had no opinion of her prior to her selection for the vice-presidential candidacy (Gallup 2008). Despite the lack of name recognition, many of the skills it takes to be successful in pageants were relevant to her political career. The ability to disarm a crowd of thousands with charisma, as seen in her address to the Republican National Convention, helped substantially on the campaign trail and in obtaining support from average Americans. While Palin may have lacked substance in her speeches and interviews, her overwhelming confidence and poise played an important role in her public persona and appeal (Miller and Peake 2010).

Though Palin did not fit into the celebrity mold and few knew of her turn as Miss Wasilla, the news media framed her as a beauty queen and primed voters to think of her as such, focusing considerable attention on her good looks. Palin's pageant past and appearance overwhelmingly influenced her media coverage, despite her silence about her pageant participation. One article stated: "Barely a blip on the political radar before now, Palin has to go the extra mile to hone her VP style. But far from uglifying herself, she plays up her sexuality... In this political marriage, Palin clearly knows she's the trophy." (*Los Angeles Times*, 9/7/08). The author of that piece described the "beauty queen turned politician by way of the PTA" as a candidate who was careful about her appearance. This emphasis on Palin's looks was not unusual. Fridkin, Carle, and Woodall (2012) found that over half of all broadcast news stories about Palin mentioned her appearance, while only five percent of stories about the Democratic vice presidential candidate made note of his appearance. Without the candidate ever mentioning it, her beauty queen past played a role in her media coverage and voter assessments.

Unlike Venezuelans and Jamaicans, Americans are ambivalent towards beauty pageants (Banet-Weiser 1999). Though American pageants were popular through the 1980s, viewership has declined substantially in recent years (upi.com 2010). In the United States "pageant officials constantly worry about market share as a barometer of the pageant's continuing success. The return of the two-piece swimsuit to the 1997 pageant was seen by many as a gimmick to improve drooping viewer ratings" (Watson and Martin 2000: 119). Despite these attempts at garnering support, attitudes toward pageants have remained lackluster. While many Americans are uncertain about beauty pageants, the conflict between pageants and feminist ideals has led to considerable scorn from those concerned with the objectification of women (Banet-Weiser 1999; Dow 2003; Watson and Martin 2000). By focusing on women's physical beauty through competition (particularly the swimsuit portion), "Miss America, not unlike many women, was often depicted as the sum of her parts", leading to negative opinions (Watson and Martin 2000: 121).

Less favorable cultural attitudes toward beauty queens coupled with concerns about the credibility of attractive women in politics may affect the success of ancillary beauty queens transitioning to politics. The emphasis placed on Palin's appearance and pageant past negatively affected her perceived credibility. Her experience in beauty pageants made her a less viable candidate for national office, even with a running mate with substantially more experience (Heflick and Goldenberg 2009).

Eva Joly

Although now a French politician, Eva Joly won her beauty queen title in Norway. Born Gro Eva Farseth in Oslo, Joly competed in the Miss Norway pageant as a teenager. After moving to France to work as an au pair, she began studying for her law degree at night, ultimately obtaining her degree at age 38. Appointed as a state investigating judge in 1990, she quickly earned professional respect as an unflinching power against corporate financial corruption. Elected to the European Parliament as a member of the French Green Party in 2009, Joly more recently stood as a candidate for the French presidency. After winning the 2011 Green Party-Europe Ecology (EELV) coalition primary with 58% of the vote—despite polling data that suggested little hope for her campaign—Joly represented the EELV coalition in the 2012 presidential election, but was only able to obtain slightly over 2% of the final tally.

Unlike many former beauty queens running for office, the media did not discover her pageant participation until her campaign for the French presidency, almost certainly because her pageant experience took place outside France. Despite this late introduction of her pageant past, the media found a variety of opportunities to address her role in Norwegian pageants. Commenting on early photos of her, *Le Post* commented, “Looking at this photo, it is difficult to imagine that this pretty, carefree face would become a reckless terror in the courtroom, a nightmare embodying power, before attempting to run for the Presidency of the Republic” (*Le Post* 6/2/2011). While Joly was most well known for her role as a French magistrate, this new information was occasionally used to question her credibility. Joly attempted to distance herself from this experience, focusing instead on her political experience. Asked about her pageant past, Joly declared them sexist, arguing that she did not have the “same level of consciousness” then (*Le Post* 6/2/2011).

Joly is an ancillary beauty queen. While her beauty queen past became relevant during her recent campaign, it was included as a point of interest rather than a replacement for her other, more substantive news coverage. Her turn as a Norwegian beauty queen was only recently revealed and it is quite clear that Joly’s years of experience as a top magistrate, rather than her beauty queen past, led to her political participation.

Much like in the United States, the popularity of beauty pageants has dwindled in France. Since the mid 1990s, the Miss France contest has steadily declined in viewership despite attempts to get viewers involved in selecting the winner (Berretta 2010). Additionally, many find pageants do not comport well with strong national attitudes toward equality for women. A recent French parliamentary report suggested banning pageants for girls under 16 in order to combat the hypersexualization of girls (Jouanno 2012). Focusing on the detrimental effect pageants have on gender equality, the report condemned these pageants for presenting “degrading images of women” that “value a stereotyped vision of girls constructed principally on appearance” (Jouanno 2012: 100). While Joly is known primarily for her abundant legal experience, the beauty queen revelation altered her framing by the media. In light of French attitudes toward pageants more generally, this focus on Joly’s pageant experience may have colored voters’ views, making it more difficult to advance her political career, despite the fact that it has been half a century since she wore a sash.

Conclusions

Our primary goal in this paper was to identify this path to power. We argue that this pathway to power may be analogous to the pathway for actors, athletes, and astronauts that Canon (1990) identified, and equally deserving of academic focus. Open solely to women, this path has the potential to provide women with both the skills and confidence necessary for a political career. We argue that there are two distinct types of beauty queen politicians: celebrity and ancillary beauty queens. Through our case studies, we illustrate that celebrity beauty queens often transition to politics more quickly following their pageant experiences because they use their pageant pasts as a form of political capital. Celebrity beauty queens are more likely helped by their pageant past in their quest for office than ancillary beauty queens largely because of the cultural contexts in which they emerge. Ancillary beauty queens cannot leverage their pageant pasts in the same way, and are unable to gain the media attention and representational role that celebrity queens acquire.

This article provides an initial examination of a previously unidentified path to power. We suggest that future research examine the media’s role in shaping perceptions of beauty queens in politics. Traditional standards of newsworthiness have resulted in more coverage for female political candidates, who (still seen as rarities) may be perceived as worthy of more media coverage than male candidates (Kahn 1994: 155). This is more so the case for beauty queens turned politicians; they are likely to attract more media attention than their non-beauty queen female counterparts.¹⁸ Research into the case of Sáez

¹⁸ We believe there are two reasons for this. First, in certain cultural contexts, demonstrated here by the Venezuelan and Jamaican cases, beauty pageants and contestants are a source of national pride. The news media would see a

indicated that the media focused much attention on Sáez, but that the type of attention that Sáez received may have undermined her campaign. Similarly, scholars should also investigate alternative paths to power that beauty queens simultaneously use in their pursuit of office. Writing of Belize, Wilk discloses that “The most common public discussion of the reasons why one woman won are comments on the contestants’ wealth, ethnicity, political patronage or family connections.” (Wilk 1995: 131-132); these same discussions of why women won may be relevant outside pageants. Has a beauty queen succeeded because of kinship ties? Does a beauty queen have the same background characteristics of other politicians (i.e., law degree)?¹⁹

Finally, we suggest that further research by political sociologists should examine the effects that pageant participation has on girls’ and young women’s sense of political efficacy and confidence. Do pageant participants believe they are more qualified to participate politically than other girls and young women? By evaluating feelings of self-confidence and political efficacy through survey methodology we can improve our understanding of the causal mechanism at work in this path to power. While we recognize that our research does not address causality, we believe future research should.

Beauty pageants not only provide important opportunities for women to learn valuable skills that are transferable to politics, but evaluating them as a path to power may give insight into the role that beauty and appearance play in shaping power dynamics in various cultural contexts. Perceptions of beauty in different cultures may influence women’s abilities to gain political power. Here, we make an initial effort to examine the role culture plays in transferring beauty to politics, but greater knowledge of the intersection of beauty and power may improve women’s chances at gaining office.

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political campaign by one of these women as newsworthy. Second, in more critical contexts, as in the United States and France, a former pageant competitor is likely to attract media attention because of beliefs that a beauty queen should not become an elected official.

¹⁹ Anecdotal evidence indicates that some politically prominent and wealthy families do see marriages to beauty queens. In one well-known case, former Argentine president Carlos Menem married Miss Universe 1997.

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