

How to write about Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann without invoking a ‘catfight’



by [Joanne Bamberger](#) Published June 1, 2011 11:16 am Updated June 2, 2011 12:39 pm

With the rollout of [Sarah Palin’s East Coast bus tour](#) this past weekend and [Michele Bachmann’s near-acknowledgment](#) on “Good Morning America” Tuesday that she’ll announce her presidential candidacy in Iowa in June, analysts are wondering, “Will they or won’t they?” Is there enough political bandwidth for two dynamic Republican women on the road to the White House or will one necessarily have to shove the other one out? Media watchers and journalists have a slightly different question they need to answer as they cover this unfolding story: Can a race between two women be written about without sexist undertones?

While just a year ago, TheWeek.com wondered whether the Tea Party duo would be [the new face of the GOP](#), a recent article on Salon asked [“Are We Ready for Two Women at Once?”](#) And the Canadian Press recently ran a story entitled, [“Two Women in a Political Race? Must Be a Catfight, According to Palin-Bachmann Buzz,”](#) in which Deborah Walsh, the head of the Rutgers University Center for American Women and Politics lamented what she called the media’s [“knee-jerk tendency”](#) to portray competing female politicians as rivals who make the characters of the movie “Mean Girls” look tame, saying that it’s shocking to her that in 2011, “You get two women in a race and it becomes a catfight.”



Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., left, waves to the rally crowd as Sarah Palin looks on before Palin addressed the crowd in support of Bachmann’s re-election Wednesday April 7, 2010 in Minneapolis. (Jim Mone/AP)

Somehow the recent race for the New York Congressional seat between Kathy Hochul and Jane Corwin escaped that sort of anti-woman tone. It doesn’t look like we’re going to be so lucky when it comes to Palin and Bachmann even though Bachmann told George Stephanopoulos earlier this week, [“I like Sarah Palin a lot. We’re friends.](#) And I don’t consider her a competitor, I consider her a friend. But my comparison ultimately is to Barack Obama.”

In a recent piece at Politico entitled, [“Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann Size Each Other Up.”](#) journalists Ben Smith and Maggie Haberman wrote, “... there are signs of tensions between the [Palin and Bachmann] camps. And the iron-clad laws of politics suggest there isn’t enough room for the two powerful personalities to occupy the same political space in 2012.”

I’m not sure what iron-clad laws of politics the authors are referring to, but on its face, there appears to be a growing meme that the GOP as a whole has to decide on either Palin or Bachmann before the primary season, implying that two women in the most high-profile race in America is one woman too many.

As Democratic activist Christine Pelosi has noted, “There has been room in U.S. presidential primaries for multiple boring white guys for over two centuries; certainly there is room for two dynamic women in 2012.”

Reporting on the so-called debate about whether we can have more than one woman candidate per political party is, in and of itself, a piece of outdated sexism, similar to coverage of Hillary Clinton and Palin in 2008.

Clinton – a U.S. Senator at the time – was referred to as a [nagging, bitchy woman who was playing the victim card](#). Palin, then governor of Alaska, was subjected to endless questions about [whether a mother of young children could](#) — or even should — run for the VP slot, because, after all, how would she also have time to pack the kids’ lunches or drive them to ice hockey practice?

In response to the Politico article, the publication engaged in an online debate at its [“In the Arena” area](#), asking pundits and experts to weigh in on the substantive question of whether the Bachmann was a threat to Palin. Some of the responses foreshadow the minefield that awaits reporters who will be trying to write about the Bachmann/Palin phenomenon without falling on a sexist landmine.

For example, former member of the New Hampshire State House of Representatives Fran Wendelboe says [there is not room for both women](#).

[Karen Floyd, former chairwoman of the South Carolina Republican Party, disagrees](#). Floyd writes:

...why is this even a question?

Why are there not more woman offering themselves for the highest position in our country? Voters are certainly capable of discerning differences between candidates, whether the current comparison is two socially conservative, attractive, accomplished women such as Congresswoman Bachmann and Gov. Palin, or two socially conservative, attractive, accomplished men such as Congressman Ryan and Senator Santorum.

Democratic strategist Margie Omero also takes exception to the idea that there’s only enough political oxygen in the 2012 race for one woman, even if they do have similar philosophies.

“In an evolving field [of candidates] that is barely energizing anyone, [having this conversation] suggests it’s somehow wrong to have multiple women candidates. I think that’s more damaging than cartoonish ‘catfight’ language,” Omero says.

Some online commentators are reiterating the “catfight” scenario, though most reporters in mainstream outlets have steered clear of that phrase, though [comparisons to characters in the movie “Bridesmaids”](#) or [political “frenemies”](#) are starting to pop up. Feminist author Gloria

Feldt says journalists should use the presence of Palin and Bachmann in the same race as an opportunity.

“Journalists make their names by sharpening the issues,” says Feldt. “There’s not a dime’s worth of difference between Palin and Bachmann on the issues. So this is a good time to point out that ‘catfight’ [or other sexist language to describe their contest] is not an acceptable term, especially when there is no substantive difference; instead we should celebrate the presence of two politically ambitious women who are legitimately competing for the same position.”

Should reporters and editors keep a cheat sheet on their desks of words and phrases to steer clear of as we move forward in the lead-up to the 2012 presidential election? If so, I’d suggest that “catty” and “claws are out” should go on that list, as well.

But Sandra Fish, a journalism instructor at the University of Colorado says, “I think most media are more likely to try to avoid such characterizations. That said, I think it’s valid to compare the two women and their potential candidacies because they have similar ideologies and policy priorities and they both favor nontraditional techniques — like [Bachmann giving her own State of the Union response](#) and [Palin going on a bus tour with no media coverage](#).”

Of course, Palin and Bachmann could put an end to the discussion about how to cover them as political rivals by just announcing their Palin-Bachmann 2012 ticket.

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