


# On Hillary Clinton's Pandering

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John Gillis / AP

Has hot sauce ever mattered this much in an election? Earlier this week, during the run-up to the New York Democratic primary, the condiment became part of a minor controversy involving Hillary Clinton. In an interview with the hip-hop morning show “The Breakfast Club” on urban radio station Power 105.1, an interviewer asked Clinton about items she always carried with her. Clinton’s answer was immediate. “Hot sauce,” she said.

On a radio station targeted towards black people with music that most would consider connected to black culture, Clinton’s comments looked for all the world like a textbook attempt at pandering from a campaign that has long been accused by young black people of doing just that. The interviewers themselves responded immediately, questioning Clinton about pandering in a joking way. The response on social media was critical of Clinton, and echoed sentiments that have often been expressed on Twitter and Facebook before for previous campaign faux pas. But this particular incident provides a good case study on just what pandering is and the difficulties of making genuine intercultural and intergenerational political connections that seem to plague Clinton the most with young black voters.

“I got hot sauce in my bag” has become a common refrain after Beyoncé’s hit single “Formation” gained popularity as a pro-black anthem, espousing a worldview that proudly embraces certain stereotypes and characteristics that were once deemed “too black” for polite society or undesirable. Hot sauce has long been associated with a certain ugly caricature of black culture—a caricature that frankly doesn’t make much sense. Quasi-objectively, hot sauce is just really damn good.

But it does make sense, then, that many young black people might be upset by a white politician claiming to love hot sauce in an interview that was clearly targeted towards them and their vote. The situation might not be any different if a politician were to awkwardly proclaim a love of fried chicken or watermelon in a speech at Howard University, or if a former governor of Massachusetts were to ask “Who let the dogs out?” while posing with a group of black people for a photo.

Unlike those clearly off-the-mark and awkward scenarios, however, this time Clinton has authenticity on her side. Her love of hot sauce has been on the record for decades and it is a love that surpasses the affection most people have for any food. Her tolerance for spiciness and preference for covering foods with it borders on the surreal. Hot sauces have been named after her much-professed love for the stuff. Out of all the little personal and humanizing quirks and tidbits known about the candidates—from Bernie Sanders’s dandruff to Ted Cruz’s cheese

craze—this is one of the weirdest. And given that background and Clinton’s automatic response to what appeared to be an off-the-cuff question, it appears that this answer was genuine.

But genuineness isn’t the end of the story with pandering. After all, it may very well be possible that a politician who plays up a love for fried chicken in black spaces actually loves fried chicken. It may also be possible that Mitt Romney really does enjoy the sonic stylings of the Baha Men. So it’s also possible that Clinton was aware of just where she was speaking and played up what she suspected would connect with her audience. At some level, intent may not even matter. As is true of most cross-cultural dialogues, especially those involving politicians, the context is what animates the response.

Is pandering even bad? Politics often seems to require it. The flag pins, the baby kissing, the brewery visits, the hard hats, and the awkward mangled Spanish phrases are all part of the well-choreographed dance of polished political peacocks. Although cynicism animates much of political debate and although voters likely suffer few delusions about the well-educated and well-paid political class, pandering plays towards the central optimism of elections. *This candidate really gets me.*

Over the course of a primary race, candidates are hammered into well-defined archetypes that play on that optimism, even if they don’t quite fit the bill. An Arkansan governor plays saxophone on *Arsenio*. A junior senator from Illinois hones a sing-song church cadence and a love for basketball. A congressman who has served since the Cold War and a multi-billionaire who started running for president 16 years ago become upstart outsiders who will turn Washington on its head. A former secretary of state who once spread the racist myth of “superpredators” and bristled at losing to President Obama’s black-led coalition now seeks to claim the mantle of that same coalition. Despite the cynicism, it seems that pandering works on some levels and is a natural part of how elections unfold.

In Clinton’s case, though, there is a history of pandering that hasn’t always worked in her favor. An appearance at the Apollo last month was met with groans after she made the ill-advised decision to “raise the roof.” #NotMyAbuela trended on Twitter after another ill-advised choice to run a campaign comparing Clinton to Latino voters’ grandmothers. The Clinton campaign logo was widely mocked for a sharing a civil-rights variant of its logo which included Rosa Parks—relegated, once again, to the back.

If all candidates pander, why does Clinton seem to be held to a higher standard? Gender may play a role. Perhaps men are simply given more critical leeway—a charge reflected in the ceaseless back-and-forth about “tone” between her campaign, the Sanders camp, and debate moderators. Also, unlike Sanders, Clinton is such a known quantity now that it is hard to see her as anything but the media-crafted image as a moderate-leaning calculating pragmatist, an image that might persist even through genuine changes of heart and strategy. Sanders, however, benefits from being a bit of a political *tabula rasa*. He was a relatively unknown candidate before the race. In other words, it’s easier to sell Bernie Sanders as your angry grandfather who “gets it” than it is to sell Hillary Clinton as your abuela.