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08 THE 2008 CAMPAIGN: The Democrats

For Clinton the Speaker, the Smaller the Better

By PATRICK HEALY

When Hillary Rodham Clinton speaks to large audiences, be it a rally with several thousand students or a fund-raiser with well-heeled donors, she often sounds more like a senator than a presidential candidate — delivering wonky recitations of her policy positions instead of a raise-the-roof stemwinder.

Yet in intimate settings, like her visit on Monday to the Yale Child Study Center in New Haven, Mrs. Clinton comes across far more personally, listening and empathizing and on occasion showing her emotional side. Indeed, at the Yale center, where she volunteered in the early 1970s, she became teary as her old boss praised “the incomparable Hillary.”

Mrs. Clinton has struggled for a year to compete with the oratory of her main Democratic rival, Senator Barack Obama. Sometimes her stump speech aspires to grace notes, like her new line about “the America I see,” but just as often she raises her voice to a shout that can sound grating. She has expressed discomfort with talking about herself, even though some voters have said that they wished she was as accessible as Mr. Obama appears to be.

Her advisers say that voters appreciate a candidate who listens and talks to them, and are not looking to be whipped up at every rally. And Mrs. Clinton does deliver lines that draw big cheers, like when she tells college students that she wants to reform the student loan industry.

But privately her advisers also acknowledge that if Mrs. Clinton wins the Democratic presidential nomination, she will have to improve her performance at huge rallies to keep voters enthusiastic about her candidacy during the long haul of a general election.

“Big rallies are clearly not her strength,” said one senior adviser, who spoke on condition of anonymity in exchange for a blunt assessment of his candidate. “She’s far better at town-hall meetings, round tables, smaller venues. The challenge for her is to connect with and inspire large audiences more than she does now.”

This shortcoming was on clear display Friday night at a campaign fund-raiser at the Orpheum Theater in San Francisco. Mrs. Clinton was introduced by an old friend, the actress



Hillary Rodham Clinton at the Yale Child Study Center on Monday. Her aides acknowledge that while she may excel in such intimate settings, she can be less than inspiring before large crowds.

Mary Steenburgen, who marveled at the candidate’s “sense of humor about life and herself.”

“Her belly laugh is more raucous and dirty than mine, which is saying something,” Ms. Steenburgen said. “She is even more human — she does get tired and sad and hurt, but she is more able to pick herself up and dust herself off than anyone I know.”

When it was her turn to take center stage, however, Mrs. Clinton showed none of those personality traits. She delivered what sounded like a university lecture, analyzing domestic and foreign policy issues and laying out her plans for tax credits, health care and education reform.

“Hillary Clinton can dismiss soaring oratory all she wants, but it works and there is a time and a place for it, such as Friday night in San Francisco,” said Ruth Sherman, a political communications consultant who has been tracking Mrs. Clinton’s speeches. “When she cannot drop her prepared remarks in favor of what the moment dictates, it bespeaks a tin ear, a lack of flexibility and certainly a missed opportunity.”

A better moment for Mrs. Clinton, Ms. Sherman and other political analysts said, was when she opened up about the rigors of the campaign trail in New Hampshire. She became teary-eyed as she talked about her passion for the race, in spite of its physical and emotional toll. Many women said in exit polls that the episode led them to support Mrs. Clinton in the state’s primary, which

she won, despite having fallen behind Mr. Obama in public opinion polls.

She showed that personal side again on Monday when she went to Yale to discuss children and health care. She was introduced by Penn Rhodeen, a child researcher and her former boss at the child study center, who described how Mrs. Clinton arrived at his door “dressed mostly in purple” in a sheepskin coat and bell bottoms.

“So 1972,” he said, to laughter.

“Now we hope that you, the incomparable Hillary, will be president of the United States,” he added.

Mrs. Clinton raised her left hand to her cheek and brushed something away with her finger. “I said I would not tear up,” she said. “Already, we’re not on that path.”

While her advisers have said that Mrs. Clinton would never cry on command to win sympathy from voters, they also believe that these moments are effective, and that she needs to start showing “more heart than head” at large rallies.

They are, however, comforted by one thing: The leading Republican candidates, Senator John McCain of Arizona and former Gov. Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, are not known for delivering stemwinders either. So should she emerge victorious over Mr. Obama, Mrs. Clinton may not face the same sort of unflattering comparisons with her Republican opponent over the ability to rouse a rally.

Julie Bosman contributed reporting from New Haven.