

Media Coverage of Women Candidates

Are the media at least partly to blame for women's underrepresentation in politics? The question has generated much debate.¹ Early studies found that male candidates received more total coverage and better coverage than female candidates. Newer studies find that coverage for women has improved with time. But gendered coverage continues to be a challenge for women's candidacies. And while the rise of new forms of media offers women candidates new opportunities to connect with voters, it has also created new opportunities for sexism to impact women's candidacies.

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Seminal work by Kim Fridkin Kahn found that women running for U.S. Senate and for governor in the 1980s received less coverage, and more negative coverage, than male candidates, with greater gender discrepancies among Senate than gubernatorial candidates.² Using an experiment and prototype articles that mimicked the different coverage patterns she observed, Kahn further found that these patterns had important consequences for voter evaluations.³ Candidates—and especially Senate candidates—whose coverage resembled the “female candidate” pattern of press coverage fared worse with voters in a hypothetical contest than those who received the “male candidate” press coverage. The hypothetical Senate candidate receiving “female” press coverage was seen by voters as less electable, with weaker leadership skills.

The good news for women candidates: most recent studies find that amount of coverage has equalized. For example, James Devitt found that male and female candidates for governor in four states in 1998 received the same amount of coverage.⁴ Dianne Bystrom and her coauthors also find similarity in amount of coverage in mixed-gender U.S. Senate and gubernatorial races between 1998 and 2002.⁵ In a more recent study, Linda Fowler and Jennifer Lawless, examining women

gubernatorial candidates in the 1990s, do not find many direct gender effects on coverage once other factors are controlled.⁶

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But non-sexist coverage remains elusive. One of the most consistent—and persistent—findings to emerge from studies is that women candidates receive more attention to appearance, personality, and family than men.⁷ For example, Bystrom and her coauthors found, in newspaper coverage of 2002 mixed-gender gubernatorial and senatorial races, that 8% of news stories about female candidates mentioned the candidate's marital status, compared with only 1% of men's news stories, and that 6% of women's news stories in that year mentioned appearance, compared with only 1% of the men's stories.⁸ Bystrom and her colleagues also found disparities in the extent to which reporters call attention to the gender of women candidates compared with men candidates. In an extensive analysis of 2006 and 2008 contests, Johanna Dunaway and her coauthors find that male-female gubernatorial races are more likely to focus on personality traits than other contests.

Qualitative examples of gendered media coverage abound.⁹ For example, Carol Moseley-Braun, the only African American woman to ever serve in the U.S. Senate, who sought the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination, was once described by The Chicago Tribune as a “den mother with a cheerleader's smile.”¹⁰

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Winning office does not end the effort to obtain fair media coverage; women officeholders, and not just candidates, strive for equitable press coverage. For example, in a study conducted in 1998, David Niven and Jeremy Zilber found that congressional press secretaries felt that the press defined women members of the U.S. House by their gender.¹¹ Press secretaries who worked for women were more likely than those who worked for men to believe that media coverage of their bosses was unfair. Similarly, Susan J. Carroll and Ronnee Schreiber found that reporting on women in Congress focuses largely on collective efforts on behalf of women's issues.¹² This coverage gives the mistaken impression that women members are not actively involved, either individually or collectively, in working on legislation on other issues.

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In a more recent analysis, Kim L. Fridkin and Patrick J. Kenney compare the local press coverage of male and female senators with the senators' communications.¹³ They find that the press is more likely to distort the messages of female than male senators and that women receive less coverage. On a more positive note, they also find that women are more likely than men to be credited for positive policy initiatives and to be described with positive traits.

In an extensive study of Hillary Clinton's television news coverage over the course of her time on the political stage, Shawn J. Parry-Giles shows that the media play an important role in shaping judgments of politicians' authenticity.¹⁴ Journalists serve as "character judges" who scrutinize leaders through gendered notions

of authenticity. The study shows that while political women may be lauded for assuming a progressive role, they risk violating traditional notions of womanhood and, as a consequence, jeopardize their portrayal as authentic leaders. Parry-Giles concludes that men in politics continue to be advantaged with the press in terms of judgments of political authenticity.

WOMEN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

The race for the presidency garners the most public attention and the most media coverage. As a particularly "masculine" office, the presidency has proven to be a glass ceiling for women candidates.¹⁵ Unfortunately, coverage of female presidential candidates has usually reflected and reproduced the cultural idea that the president should be male. In an analysis that stretches from the 1800s to 2008, Erika Falk argues that the press has historically trivialized women's candidacies and portrayed them in stereotypical ways.¹⁶ She argues that "the press portrays women as losers and novelties and not serious candidates" and worries that biased coverage discourages women from running.¹⁷

When Elizabeth Dole sought the Republican presidential nomination in 2000, the amount of coverage she received failed to reflect her standings in the polls, disproportionately focused on her lack of funds, and treated her bid as a novelty.¹⁸ Dole received less issue coverage than the male candidates, and more attention was paid to her personality and appearance than to those of the other candidates.¹⁹ Moreover, a qualitative analysis revealed that she was characterized negatively as "scripted, rehearsed, robotic, controlled"—criticisms that seemed to reflect the gender bias of reporters.²⁰

Regina Lawrence and Melody Rose found that Hillary Clinton received a similar amount of coverage to Barack Obama in 2008, but that her coverage was more negative.²¹ Falk's analysis showed that Clinton received more equitable coverage than previous female presidential

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candidates in some respects, but also found inequities in coverage and the persistence of the traditional patterns of media coverage of female presidential candidates.²² Even public opinion polls showed that many Democrats believed Hillary Clinton was not treated as well by the press as the other candidates.²³ The media also dwelled more on whether Clinton would exit the Democratic race, and when she would exit, than is typical of presidential nomination coverage.²⁴

Most notably, media coverage of Hillary Clinton in 2008—and especially cable news coverage—was filled with sexist remarks, from Glenn Beck describing Clinton as a “stereotypical bitch” to Tucker Carlson stating, “When she [Hillary Clinton] comes on television, I involuntarily cross my legs.”²⁵ There were also instances of sexism faced by Clinton on the campaign trail that the media did not regard as newsworthy: Susan J. Carroll observes, “Sexism and sexist remarks by journalists and on-air pundits were treated as acceptable—a normal part of political discourse.”²⁶ Although they are from different parties and brought quite different backgrounds to the 2008 presidential election, both Clinton and Sarah Palin were portrayed in sexist ways and arguably faced the same gender stereotypes.²⁷

Analysis of Palin’s media coverage showed traditional gendered news coverage. Stories about Palin were more likely to mention her gender, appearance, and family status compared with Biden’s.²⁸ And both Palin’s and Clinton’s coverage in blogs and cable news portrayed the women in vulgar and misogynist ways.²⁹

Thus, the harsh treatment women faced in 2008 was a significant departure from what had appeared to be a trend of more equitable treatment of women and men candidates.

CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Today’s 24-hour media cycle, instant communication, and polarized political landscape could deter anyone from throwing his or her hat into the ring. Given gender bias in the media, concern about quality of media coverage and level of media scrutiny may weigh on

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the minds of women more than men. Indeed, Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox find that dealing with the press is among the campaign activities that discourage women potential candidates more than men from running for office.³⁰

The underrepresentation of women in the news industry itself and decision-making positions therein partially contributes to distorted and biased coverage.³¹ As one journalist put it, “With so few women in decision-making positions, there still is often no one to raise a red flag when egregious sexism appears in news stories.”³² Women are only about one-quarter of television news directors.³³ In an analysis of major TV networks, wire, on-line news sources, and print, the Women’s Media Center found that over 60% of all bylines and on-camera appearances were by men. A new study of Sunday morning political talk shows reveals that the vast majority of guests (67%) are white men; women of color are especially underrepresented.³⁴

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To overcome bias, women candidates strategize about gender stereotypes and how best to present themselves to voters and to the press.³⁵ In addition, educating journalists and calling attention to bias is an important strategy for challenging sexism and improving coverage of women candidates.³⁶ A campaign aimed at combating sexism in the media holds promise. Called “Name It. Change It.”, the project monitors press treatment of women candidates and documents sexist coverage.³⁷ Representatives of the media are encouraged to take a pledge to cover candidates fairly and refrain from sexist questions and portrayals. Research conducted by Celinda Lake of Lake Research Partners using an online survey in 2010 indicates that women candidates can combat sexist media treatment if they acknowledge and respond to the mistreatment.

Interestingly, Erika Falk argues that Hillary Clinton’s attempts to call out sexism in 2008 were treated with accusations that she was playing the “gender card.”³⁸ The media treated this gender-card playing in a negative light—as a phenomenon that is used to gain an unfair advantage. Thus, women candidates’ responses to sexist treatment can potentially beget further gendered coverage.

Recent studies have examined how candidates are

using new media. A study of 2012 Twitter use by U.S. House candidates found that women candidates are more likely to have Twitter accounts and more likely to Tweet.³⁹ Women’s presence on Twitter is still affected by their overall presence in politics, however. For example, in a study of Twitter use in 2011, Claudette G. Artwick finds that quotes from men are much more commonly tweeted by reporters than are quotes by women. In fact, the share of quotes by women was smaller than their actual presence in politics.⁴⁰

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While new forms of media provide new ways for women candidates to communicate their messages, the gender dynamics of these new media can be concerning. For example, a national survey revealed that women are more likely than men to experience sexual harassment online, with this experience especially like to occur among young women.⁴¹ The organization WAM (Women, Action, and the Media) is partnering with Twitter to combat harassment.⁴²

Future Research Directions

More research is needed to determine whether and how media coverage differs—for both women candidates and women officeholders—across types of office, party, and race/ethnicity. For example, Sarah Gershon found that minority congresswomen fare worse in terms of amount of coverage and the more negative tone of coverage compared with Anglo women and minority male members of Congress.⁴³ More analyses like Gershon’s are needed.

New experimental studies can help determine how gendered media coverage affects voter evaluations of candidates. Multi-method investigative approaches, such as those of Heldman and her coauthors, that combine qualitative and quantitative analysis of media coverage, and both multi-candidate and in-depth, single candidate analysis, can provide a comprehensive picture of specific campaigns.⁴⁴ And as technology evolves, scholars will need to continue to examine how women candidates are faring in the new media environment.

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Further Reading

Fridkin, Kim L., and Patrick J. Kenney. 2014. *The Changing Face of Representation: The Gender of U.S. Senators and Constituent Communications*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

This study—the first of its kind—carefully examines the communication strategies of 32 women and men senators and compares the senators’ communications with local press coverage in 2006. The senators’ reelection campaigns are also examined. Fridkin and Kenney consider citizens’ reactions to senator gender, finding important differences in citizen knowledge of their women senators compared with male senators. Throughout, the authors consider how gender stereotypes affect senators’ communication strategies as well as media coverage. Data sources include an analysis of 4,000 news stories and nearly 2,000 press releases, as well as surveys of 18,000 citizens across 17 states.

Falk, Erika. 2010. *Women for President: Media Bias in Nine Campaigns*. 2nd ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Falk uses paired comparisons of male and female presidential candidates throughout U.S. history to study media coverage of campaigns. Her study of nine women’s candidacies extends from the 1800s through the 2008 election, ending with Hillary Clinton’s candidacy. Her analysis reveals the uphill battle of women presidential candidates due to the biased nature of media

coverage, including recurring themes that women are not viable or competent to be president. Media coverage of Clinton showed improvement over that of past female candidates but many of the stereotypical coverage patterns persisted.

Carlin, Diana B. and Kelly L. Winfrey. 2009. “Have You Come a Long Way, Baby? Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in 2008 Campaign Coverage.” *Communication Studies* 60. September-October: 326-43.

This article examines how sexist media coverage during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign of Democratic challenger Hillary Clinton and Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin can potentially increase public skepticism about a woman’s fitness to serve as President or Vice President of the United States. The media coverage of Clinton and Palin centered on common stereotypes of corporate women (e.g., “sex object” “mother” “pet/cheerleader” and “iron maiden”). In moving forward, Cardin and Winfrey suggest that the media and the campaigns of female presidential candidates must attack sexism early to deter its negative influence. Moreover, scholars must educate the public about the prevailing gender stereotypes that took place during the 2008 Presidential campaign if the United States is ever to elect a female President or Vice President.

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