

Women, Politics, and the Media

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Author Note

In this paper, the term “gender” refers to one’s identity as a male, female, or nonbinary. The purpose of this paper is to expose gender bias in the media as it pertains to women in politics.

Abstract

Many Americans consume their information on politics and political candidates from the news and media outlets they watch. These media outlets help shape our beliefs and opinions as we process the information we are presented with. As a result, the way women are portrayed and spoken about in the news and other media have shaped the way we think about women that are in the public eye, particularly those that hold a public office or position of power. The research question is how news reporters talk about female candidates and how that affects the public’s opinion of them. Stereotypes and general assumptions about women based solely on their gender are a foundation for this gendered reporting. The purpose of this paper is to explain the way women are talked about in the news and its effects on their perceived competency and fitness for office.

Women, Politics, and the Media

For years, women in politics have fought against prejudiced and sexist commentary in the media. The coverage they receive is often based on their looks, their marital status, and their personal life instead of their ideas and policies. They often get portrayed as angry, unhinged, and emotional if they break from the nurturing and agreeable gender stereotype. The news that is consumed by the public every day shapes their opinion and the way they vote. Given the fact that most people form their opinions of government officials and political candidates based on what the media tells them, the way the media talks about women in politics is important. Every morning and every night, millions of Americans tune into stations like MSNBC, Fox News, and CNN, while millions of others read articles published by organizations like the New York Times and the Washington Post, as they gather information and form their opinions. The way organizations like those named above talk about women, as well as how much coverage they give them, plays a key role in attempting to overcome gender stereotypes and opening up doors for more women in politics. The question is, what have women had to face when it comes to news coverage of their careers, and have we seen a shift in focus?

Review of Literature

There are many peer-reviewed journals that provide insight into how women in politics are talked about in the news. When it comes to politics, women have to

carefully balance their masculinity and femininity to be respected and taken seriously. These articles are a representation of the evolution of women in politics and the coverage they receive from mainstream media. Analysis of stereotypes, election coverage, sexual assault in politics coverage, and news coverage of female government officials reveal the differences in the way the media covers male and female politicians.

Gender Stereotypes

The basis for the apparent gender bias in the media stems from gender stereotypes. There are stereotypical male and female traits. Toughness, decisiveness, and strength are all male traits, which also happen to be traits people want in a leader (Banwart, 2010). Stereotypical feminine traits are nurturing, warmth, and sensitivity (Banwart, 2010). Women also fight the stereotype of being too hormonal or emotionally unstable. This puts women at a disadvantage in the political field, as they must prove that they possess the perfect balance of the stereotypical masculine and feminine traits that it takes to be a good leader.

Hillary Clinton is aware of this stereotype and the obstacle it presents, which is clear in her debate performance against Donald Trump in 2016. Nonverbal communication, such as smiling, posture, gestures, raising eyebrows, eye contact, and spatial distance, by both candidates were observed and analyzed. The findings of this study were that Clinton smiled more, made more eye contact, and had more expansive postures than Trump (Wasike, 2019). These are all typical for women, especially women that are in the public eye and are vulnerable to criticism. In this debate, Trump used a lot of personal attacks and interrupted Clinton several times, yet she still remained calm, collected, and happy. Women feel the need to smile and be calm, even in a situation as nerve-wracking and overwhelming as a nationally-broadcasted presidential debate. They feel pressure to appear relaxed because they don't want to be called emotional or unstable, as women often are called in the media.

News Coverage of Female Candidates and Government Officials

In general, women receive less news coverage on issues and policies and more news coverage on appearance, family life, and their personality than men (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). Additionally, news stories about female candidates often mention children and marital status and use those to define them, rather than their candidacy (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). Clinton and Sarah Palin are prime examples of this gendered coverage. Palin's coverage was more about her "sexiness," and Clinton's coverage was more about her not being feminine enough (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). Whether women are seen as attractive and appealing, or unattractive and boring, the media focuses on their looks. Reporters used Palin's attractiveness against her, saying she couldn't be taken seriously because she was pretty, while they used Clinton's anti-femininity and outfit choice of pantsuits instead of skirts as justification for her husband having an affair (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009).

The media also mentioned their children in a majority of their coverage. Palin's role as a mother was used against her in a way that questioned whether she could do her job if she were elected (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). Clinton did not have

young children at the time of the election like Palin did, but she received criticism as well. She was framed as the nagging mother and was accused of bringing her child on the campaign trail as a tool to make her look more nurturing and caring (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). This reveals a clear gender bias in news coverage of female politicians, as a male candidate is not usually asked about his family life or questioned on his parenting.

In 2007, Nancy Pelosi was appointed Speaker of the House. The news coverage that led up to her appointment and thereafter was highly gendered. Her role as a mother was used in stories about her, as it was with Palin and Clinton. The Washington Post wrote a story that explained that despite working and being politically active, she never abandoned her family (Dabbous & Ladley, 2010). She was also accused of being a wife, mother, and grandmother in her day-to-day life, and in her spare time she was Speaker of the House (Dabbous & Ladley, 2010). This further suggests that women are to be wives and mothers first, and they take their jobs less seriously when they have a family. Pelosi's children and grandchildren were also mentioned frequently in many articles, some of which seemed to suggest that Pelosi picked up her leadership skills not from political experience or knowledge, but from being a mother (Dabbous & Ladley, 2010). This takes away from her credibility and downplays the experience she has in her professional life in politics.

In addition to Palin, Clinton, and Pelosi, Elizabeth Dole and Claire McCaskill are also living proof of media gender bias. In a study about Clinton, Palin, Dole, and McCaskill's news coverage on the campaign trail, it was found that women received more gendered news coverage than their male opponents (Meeks, 2012). They were often described with gender or uniqueness labels, meaning that they were referred to as the "first female" or "female candidate", while men didn't have any gender labels attached to their names (Meeks, 2012). This is unsurprising, as being a male in politics is the norm, so it doesn't seem necessary to call them by their gender. This furthers the notion that women in politics is something out of the ordinary, since news reports feel the need to point out the fact that they are women. This study also revealed that as women climbed the ladder and ran for executive offices, their gendered news coverage increased (Meeks, 2012). Palin, Clinton, and Dole all experienced jumps in gendered news coverage when they ran for president, as opposed to other offices (Meeks, 2012). They were often referred to as a wife or mother. Notably, Palin received nearly 40% more gendered coverage than the male candidates, presumably because she was often described as attractive and her looks were often talked about (Meeks, 2012).

In order to be taken seriously and be seen as fit for office, a female candidate needs more coverage on her policies and less coverage on her appearance and personality.

In the Funk and Coker (2016) experiment, individuals were shown a fake Facebook ad of a candidate, Kirsten Gillibrand, but she was given a different name and all mention of a political party was taken out (Funk & Coker, 2016). Some participants were exposed to coverage that contained gender stereotypes and objectifying language, while others saw coverage that only discussed her policies and ideas, and they were to

rate the candidates on a few different traits, such as competency and seriousness (Funk & Coker, 2016). Those that were exposed to objectifying commentary were more likely to rate the candidate as less competent and less serious than those exposed to commentary on policies (Funk & Coker, 2016). In order to be taken seriously and be seen as fit for office, a female candidate needs more coverage on her policies and less coverage on her appearance and personality. The media contributes to and is largely responsible for putting women at a disadvantage simply because of her appearance and/or position as a mother or wife.

Sexual Assault Coverage

Recently in politics, sexual assault has been a topic of discussion as the Me Too movement becomes more prominent. However, the coverage of such events seems to protect the male that is accused, and the stories are only reported if they seem relevant. In 2016, four women came forward with sexual assault allegations against Trump, but it was hardly even mentioned in the media. Only 17 stories were written about the accusations, and news coverage was scarce (Blumell & Huemmer, 2017). When the Access Hollywood tape was leaked, in which Trump used vulgar language to describe how he hits on women, the media covered it extensively. There were 17,260 articles written about it, and more women came forward with allegations of sexual violence against Trump (Blumell & Huemmer, 2017). This led to more coverage of the allegations, as the topic had taken over headlines for days.

The above statistic proves that the women alone were not enough to get national or international attention. The Access Hollywood tape story made their allegations more relevant to the media. In fact, a lot of the news stories about Trump's alleged sexual violence did not focus on the women that came forward. Instead, they made Trump the focal point. Only 13% of headlines were from the woman's perspective, while 41% of headlines were about Trump and/or his family's reaction (Blumell & Huemmer, 2017). The remaining 46% mentioned Bill Clinton or the fate of Billy Bush's career (Blumell & Huemmer, 2017). The media focused more on the men in these stories, one of which was not even involved in the incident, than the women that came forward.

Spiral of Silence Theory and Dr. Christine Blasey Ford

The Spiral of Silence Theory suggests that public opinion sways one's decision to speak up on a certain issue or topic (Codington-Lacerte, 2020). If their opinion is in the majority, they are more likely to speak up. Mainstream media picked up the Access Hollywood tape story and made it big news, which led to more coverage of the women that came forward with sexual assault allegations. However, since most stories were not actually about the women but rather Trump and how it would affect him, that may have stopped women from coming forward. When Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh was nominated for the Supreme Court, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford came forward and said that Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her years before. Dr. Ford was met with a lot of scrutiny. She was not treated well by the Republican senators that

questioned her, and she received a lot of backlash for not being able to recite every detail of her sexual assault.

MSNBC and Fox News, both very prominent news stations at both ends of the political spectrum, said Kavanaugh's name twice the number of times they said Ford's in their coverage of the hearing and the events leading up to it (Greenwald, 2019). It is important to note that this is in part due to the fact that she was not identified early on, so she was referred to as "the woman" or "the accuser." However, even after she was named, she was often referred to as "the accuser," especially on Fox News (Greenwald, 2019). Not saying her name makes it less personal. It dehumanizes her. The story quickly became one of polarizing politics. It was framed as a trap set by the democrats, instead of a woman coming forward about an assault. According to the Spiral of Silence Theory, other women would take note of Dr. Ford's unfair representation and treatment online and in the media, and they would be wary of coming forward and identifying their aggressor, especially if he is a man in politics.

With the Spiral of Silence Theory, the opinion of the target doesn't matter, as the effect is essentially the same (Matthes et. al., 2018). This means that it doesn't matter who the person is going to tell, whether it's a conservative, liberal, or independent organization, it is still difficult to come forward and speak on a topic that the majority does not seem to agree with you on. In the case of Dr. Ford, even left-leaning MSNBC gave Kavanaugh's perspective more air time (Greenwald, 2019). Because it is hard to predict how that person or group of people will react, silence is seen as the best option (Matthes et. al, 2018). When survivors and accusers don't receive fair treatment, they find it easier to not speak up. That is why the way the media handles sexual assault and other sensitive topics is so important, especially in cases involving a government elected or appointed official.

Where We Go from Here: A Step in the Right Direction

One recently elected official that receives a lot of negative gendered news coverage is Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. This year, she was criticized for wearing an expensive outfit at a House hearing. She responded to the article on Twitter, stating that she thrifts her clothes (Ocasio-Cortez, 2020). The fact that her outfit was even being discussed proves that gendered news reporting still happens today. However, coverage of Ocasio-Cortez in the New York Times proves that there appears to be a shift in the way we talk about women (Beaupre, 2019). After she was elected, the focus shifted from her gender and appearance to her politics (Beaupre, 2019).

The same can be said for Hillary Clinton. Despite receiving highly gendered news coverage for the past several decades, the sexism and gender bias in the news stories decreased over time (Zulli, 2019). References to her husband have steadily decreased since she announced her candidacy for executive office (Zulli, 2019). This leaves more time to focus on her policies and issues, which are very important to cover for any candidate running for office. Uniqueness labels like "pioneer," "first woman," and "trailblazer" significantly decreased in her time going through different offices (Zulli, 2019). This could be due to the fact that as time went on, more women joined the political field. Regardless, the decrease in uniqueness labels suggests that there is a change in the way women are spoken about in politics.

Conclusion

While we still have a long way to go, we are seeing a shift in the way female candidates and officials are talked about in the media. In the mainstream media, there is not as much talk about the stereotypical feminine characteristics of female candidates, or talks of their lipstick color and clothing. But this does still happen. There is a long history of gender bias and gender stereotyping in mass media, especially in the field of politics, and that will take years to overcome, but the cases mentioned above prove that steps are being taken in the right direction.

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