

POLITICAL STRENGTH, NOT SKIRT LENGTH:
FEMALE POLITICAL FIGURES, MEDIA BIAS, AND HOW PUBLIC RELATIONS CAN
HELP

by

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Dedication

For my mother, father, and sister, who are first on every list. Without your love and support, nothing would be possible, including this project.

To Beckenrah Farm, among whose seeds imagination and determination were sown.

For my gang. You listen to me, you argue with me, you make me stronger. You love me and you believe in me. And my cup runneth over.

For Jeanette, Coya, Gerry, and all the other women whose paths ended too soon and whose brilliant lights were dimmed so harshly. I can't change the past, but I can try like hell to change the future.

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Glossary of Terms

- **Agency:** the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices¹.
- **Election cycle:** the applicable period of time in which elections occur.²
- **Feminism:** 1) the belief that men and women should have equal right and opportunities. 2) Organized activities in support of women's rights and interests.³
 - **First-wave feminism:** Refers to first concerted movement that sought the reform of women's social and legal inequalities in the nineteenth century. Key concerns of this movement were education, employment, marriage laws, and suffrage.⁴
 - **Second-wave feminism:** Refers to increase in feminist activity in America, Britain and Europe from the late sixties onward. In the U.S., the movement arose out of Civil Rights and antiwar movements. This movement sought to change the domestic and private lives of women by interfering within the spheres of reproduction, sexuality, and cultural representation.⁵
 - **Third-wave feminism:** Refers to manifestation of feminist movement in today's world. This wave is thought to be more inclusive to women in the

¹ Barker, Chris, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, Sage Publications, London, page 448.

² Graham, Austin, "What an Election Cycle? Depends on Where You are" *The NCSL Blog*, National Conference of State Legislatures, <http://www.ncsl.org/blog/2014/06/26/whats-an-election-cycle-depends-where-you-are.aspx>. (Accessed January 5, 2016)

³ "Feminism" Merriam Webster.com, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism> (Accessed January 5, 2016)

⁴ Women's Studies Department, "Week 14: Davis and Lorde," BCC Feminist Philosophy, April 29, 2012, <https://bccfeministphilosophy.wordpress.com/tag/first-wave-feminism/>. (Accessed January 20, 2016)

⁵ Ibid.

developing world, low-income women, lesbians, bisexual, and transgender women, as well as women of color⁶.

- **Gender bias:** behavior that shows favoritism over one gender to another.⁷
- **Share of voice:** "Share of voice" is a metric often used in the advertising industry to represent the relative portion of ad inventory available to a single advertiser within a defined market over a specified time period.⁸

⁶ Head, Tom, "Third-Wave Feminism," *About News*, http://civilliberty.about.com/od/gendersexuality/p/third_wave.htm. (Accessed December 15, 2014)

⁷Rothchild, Jennifer, *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_yr2012_chunk_g978140512433113_ss1-11 (Accessed Dec. 10, 2015)

⁸ Google, "Discover Your Share of Voice with Impression share reporting," *Google: Inside AdWords*, July 05, 2007, <http://adwords.blogspot.com/2007/07/discover-your-share-of-voice-with.html>. (Accessed January 30, 2016)

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Abstract

The concept of women in government is a relatively new one. It is only in the past 100 years or so that women have begun to actively participate in the U.S. political system as elected or appointed officials. Though women make up over 50% of the United States population, their representation in government is less than 20% female. Many factors contribute to this, like societal expectations about traditional gender roles and relative newness of organized feminism. Another factor that contributes to the gender imbalance in government is gender bias in media. There exists a pervasive and longstanding inclination for media to cover female political figures in a way that conflates their ability to lead with their appearance, their personality, and their personal life. This coverage results in identity crises for these individuals with which the author contends public relations and strategic communications can help. This project, therefore, explores, analyzes, and explains this media bias and its impact in both a short and long-term sense. It explores the history of this topic, its implications and what experts are saying about it. All conclusions and recommendations found in this thesis are the result of secondary research—gleaned from an extensive body of pre-existing work on the topic—and of primary research in the form of interviews. Finally, this paper suggests that trained communications professionals can help mitigate the negative impact of biased media coverage on female political figures, through public relations best practices.

Preface

The idea for this project was born when, shortly after her campaign announcement in April 2015, Hillary Clinton traveled to Iowa. I read news coverage of her visit there and was struck by the language that was used to describe the former First Lady, Senator, and Secretary of State. I'm paraphrasing here, but it was something like "she sat, perched on the edge of a hard metal chair, delicately sipping a latte." Immediately, I was disturbed. The language describing the most politically powerful woman in the United States, indeed one of the most well known and respected world leaders, gave the impression of a fragile, delicate songbird. In a country that expects absolute strength and power from its elected officials, I wondered: what did this kind of coverage do to a political figure's relationship with her constituents? I wondered this and also "why was that language used?" Where does that inclination come from? It felt somehow discouraging. Thus began this project.

Introduction: Fighting the Good Fight

In the more than 100 years that women have served as elected officials, the United States has undergone monumental changes, both as a society and as a political system. First, second, and third waves of **feminism** and gender equality movements have led to a society in which women are empowered to take active roles in government.⁹ Most of these roles are elected positions and are housed in every facet of the government—except the highest seat, of course. They serve in local, regional, state, and federal positions. Today, women can be more than wives to politicians: they can be politicians themselves and affect change on a greater scale than ever before.

All political figures face challenges, regardless of their gender. Elected officials in particular must contend with, in most cases, short terms which have them contending for re-election every two, four, or six years. Their constituents, their parties, and their peers pressure them. Most of all, they bear the weight of decision-making and determining the right course of action for entire populations. Theirs isn't an easy task.

Female political figures face challenges that are unique to their gender, however, particularly in terms effective communication. It is an indisputable fact that female political figures receive media coverage unequal to that of their male counterparts. The gap can be characterized using the advertising term “**share of voice**,” which has been readily adopted by public relations practitioners. The author proposes that while male and female figures generally gain an equal share of voice, their coverage is not equal in what I am calling “share of ear.” Indeed, the media might be talking about these female political figures, but they are not covering issues, platforms, and positions at the same frequency that they do men. The voting public is

⁹ Terms in bold can be found in the glossary (page vi)

hearing something else entirely as instead, the media covers the appearance, apparel, demeanor, and the personal lives of female candidates.

I contend that this discrepancy in media coverage is dangerous. It arrests both the ability of voting citizens to understand their leaders and the ability of female officials to be elected and govern effectively. The media bias, likely learned from years of ingrained social thought on the inferiority of women, creates barriers for female political figures. These barriers can be categorized in three distinct ways. First, there are barriers to election in races in which the woman is a candidate. This media bias also causes barriers to the achievement of legislative goals. Finally, the type of coverage that female political figures receive ultimately creates barriers to that figure being seen as a legitimate leader by voters.

What can be done? The ideal solution to this issue is the end of sexism and the destruction of gender norms. We should overcome antiquated stereotypes that exist almost entirely in the subconscious of today's Americans. Obviously, snapping our collective fingers and having this be so is a pipe dream. While **gender bias** will exist until society undergoes a significant shift and moves past it, adjustments can be made to mitigate the gap and to give female political figures a fighting chance for success. It is the belief of the author that political communicators can be agents of change on this issue. Success can come in the form of election of a candidate, the passing of her legislation, or even general acceptance of the female figure as a leader.

An entire field of public relations—political communications—helps political figures and government officials interact with and reach the public. It is these men and women who have the tools and power to invoke change, and whose ranks the author wishes to join. They can make strategic decisions with and for their candidate or employing political figure that will allow them

to reach constituents and to subvert the harmful effects of media bias. They can help female candidates and politicians take control of their narratives. Every time a female political figure is covered and the focus is superficial or clearly gender biased, it constitutes a public relations crisis. That individual's message is corrupted by an old and strong media predisposition. Public relations practitioners who work in the political arena must respond appropriately and work within the established system.

Readers may wonder, “why now?” This topic isn't a revelation, really, as it has been covered by journalists and academics for years. Thoughtful articles and books have been written on this issue, some of which the author had the pleasure to read. Despite excellent, well-formed studies of the problem, there are reasons why the project is significant. The first is that there is perpetual media bias against female candidates, which is, of course, a reflection of a large gender bias. According to the Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology, gender bias is defined as “a behavior that shows favoritism over one gender to another”.¹⁰ Despite the best efforts by many accomplished individuals, instances of this bias still run rampant in political media. There are many reasons for this, which the author explores in depth in Chapter Three, but suffice to say, they have a great deal to do with continuing unchecked stereotypes as well as the abysmally low percentage of female elected officials in political office.

This topic is also relevant in the current **election cycle**. We are at a very specific moment in history. On the one hand—and in large part thanks to a burgeoning online community, women are being empowered left and right, to achieve more and to pursue higher professional goals than ever before. On the other hand, women and so-called “women's issues” are at the forefront of discussion, particularly with two strong female candidates such as Hillary Clinton and Carly Fiorina running campaigns for the White House [as of December 2015]. The density

¹⁰ Rothchild, Jennifer, *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, (n.d.)

of female representatives in all levels of government is exceedingly low and gendered rhetoric abounds in all forms of political media.

A third and final reason for this project is this: this isn't a new phenomenon, but it is new to the author. For a great many years, she has observed the political landscape with interest and often, with frustration. The difference is that now she has the tools to examine the situation, analyze the problem, and recommend changes. Public relations strategies and tactics can be selected and implemented so that female candidates can mitigate this challenge. The author believes that without continued and energetic conversation, this issue will not improve.

The historical precedence of this issue is also significant. For years, across party lines and offices this has been a challenge for female politicians on either side of the aisle. It should be noted that this project is not a partisan one. Female candidates and elected officials from both major parties come under fire in this fashion and face similar disadvantages as a result. This thesis offers a measured look at the problem and proposes solutions that can be utilized for candidates from any level of government and any party.

All historical background and unique findings offered by this thesis are gleaned from both secondary and primary research. This includes secondary research that established not only the historical precedence for this issue, but also a baseline for judging successful communications strategies and ones that failed. Primary research findings, resulting from interviews, will be presented and will showcase the expertise of real-life political strategists and of actual political figures, women who have lived through the very bias on which the author expounds.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Each serves a unique purpose and all serve the goal of defining and explaining gendered media bias in politics. The first, "That's (Not) Ancient

History,” sets a detailed historical precedent for this issue. This media bias has been a problem since women began to run for office. The first chapter offers an overview of the history of women in government and chronological profiles of women and campaigns in which the media bias was clear and which the candidate had to overcome in order to succeed. The second chapter is “Understanding the Implications.” In it, the author will explore the intricacies of the problem itself, but also its wider societal implications. It answers these questions: What’s the problem? Do we care? Why Should We Care? With a politically apathetic populace that votes at alarmingly low rates, how much of an uphill battle is it to ask them to show concern for bias against female candidates?¹¹ The third chapter reports the findings of original interviews. While Chapter Two proves the problems from a wide, culturally sourced perspective, Chapter Three “From the Mouths of Babes,” reveals what experts in the field and on the ground are saying about this issue, and about the current state of political media and communications in the U.S. Chapter Four—“I’d Rather Rescue Myself”—will share the author’s recommended communication strategies for closing the gap. These recommendations are informed by the author’s secondary and primary research.

Chapter One: That’s (Not) Ancient History

Women can be politicians. This is not a new concept. Women have been serving in elected offices for nearly one hundred years and in that time, there has been a great deal of instances in which media caused undue challenges for them. This chapter will introduce some of these instances, where this media bias was clearly on display and threatened that individual’s

¹¹ Editorial Board, “The Worst Voter Turnout in 72 Years,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2014, New York edition, A26

likelihood of success in her position. Unfortunately, when people say, “Oh, gender bias? That’s ancient history!” it’s not, and this chapter will reveal why.

It is important to note that this problem is ubiquitous in the damage it causes. A 24-year-old running for a seat on her town council might encounter the same type of criticisms and inappropriate questioning that a seasoned politician like Elizabeth Warren or Hillary Clinton do. Therein lies the danger of unchecked media bias and the impetus for this entire project. Recent years have proven both the strength and capability of modern female political figures as well as the great challenges that they face in gaining balanced coverage by the American media. Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, newcomer Carly Fiorina, and other women in government are each, in their own way, groundbreaking. They follow in the footsteps of historical female leaders of almost mythic proportions, each of which left unique impressions and paved the way for future leaders.

Unelected, but Unforgettable—American Pioneers

Some of the most famous, earliest women in politics were never voted into office. Though they weren’t necessarily elected officials, they wielded a great deal of power. There was, admittedly, less negative coverage of these women. They seemed innocuous because they had not been elected and their power was finite.

The United States has never elected a woman to the office of President. Once, however, a woman did take that leadership role, whether they knew it or not. First Lady Edith Wilson assumed what she referred to as a “stewardship” after her husband’s—Woodrow Wilson—health

failed and he suffered a stroke.¹²¹³ In the year or more that followed, it is said that Edith Wilson effectively ran the country. She did this quietly, believing that if her husband resigned, it would be devastating to both the country and to Wilson himself.¹⁴ It was never announced to the country that Wilson had suffered the stroke and the enterprise remained shrouded in mystery for a great number of years.¹⁵ There is some disagreement about the extent to which she was in power. Many historians posture that she was, during that period, de facto president and exercised almost complete executive decision-making power.¹⁶ Mrs. Wilson maintained that she was merely a steward and was in charge of only the decision of whether or not her husband should be notified. Howard Markel, a Medical Historian from the University of Michigan, notes, “Nobody really had access to the president. They said he was ill, and he couldn’t see people, and Mrs. Wilson was sort of his go-between.”¹⁷ What went without saying is that she would then adjudicate those matters that did not make it to the president himself.

Mrs. Wilson did not make it through this period unscathed by press. In fact, the First Lady faced significant charges against her. Much of this “coverage” was predicated on the idea that she was covering up for a mentally unstable husband, or that she was, in fact, using his disadvantage to usurp his power and run the country herself. Much of this coverage painted her as a manipulative, untrustworthy character. This isn’t uncommon for women in power. It seems as though a show of power from the “weaker sex” can only come from deceit and mind games, as these are woman’s only weapons. Edith Wilson stood stalwart through the entire period, refusing to budge or allow access to her husband by anyone. She would respond “I must carry

¹² Grimes, Ryan, “Edith Wilson: first lady and acting president,” *Michigan Radio*, October 1, 2015, <http://michiganradio.org/post/edith-wilson-first-lady-and-acting-president#stream/0>

¹³ Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum, *First Lady Edith Wilson*, February 21, 2011, Swoope, Virginia, <http://www.woodrowwilson.org/assets/docs/edith%20wilson.pdf>

¹⁴ Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum, *First Lady Edith Wilson*, 2011

¹⁵ Grimes, “Edith Wilson: first lady and action president”, 2015

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

on” and she did.¹⁸ Edith Wilson possessed the strength to be an effective leader and to ignore the swipes and often-counterproductive involvement of the media.

There is perhaps no female figure more prolific, or more greatly respected in the annals of U.S. history than Eleanor Roosevelt. The wife of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, she occupied the position of first lady during arguably the most distressing period of the 20th century. The White House was facing remarkable challenges on both a national and international stage. She was on occasion known to refer to herself as “ugly” and “plain,” but that self-deprecation belied the immense power and influence she would come to hold. She was one of the most influential women in history. She was often called FDR’s “eyes and ears.”¹⁹ She traveled extensively to relief projects and other areas of concern for the president. She reported back to him but also allowed her observations to inform her own policies and positions on social services.²⁰

Eleanor Roosevelt was, more than other women at the time, in charge of her own relationship with the press. When she first set foot in the White House, she held her own press conference in which she warned the public that she would not be the “symbol of elegance” that she felt others before her had been. She set her own narrative. She also was, in a sense, the press itself. She had a daily syndicated column called “My Day,” which she authored from 1935 to her death in 1962. In it, she shared news and takeaways from her travels and thus, she drew the public in.²¹

¹⁸ Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum, *First Lady Edith Wilson*, 2011

¹⁹ George Washington University, “Why is ER often called ‘FDR’s eyes and ears?’ Is it a complete description?” *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project*, Department of History of The George Washington University, (n.d.), <https://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teaching/q-and-a/q19.cfm>. (Accessed December 12, 2015)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, “Biography of Eleanor Roosevelt,” *About the Roosevelts*, (n.d.), http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/education/resources/bio_er.html. (Accessed December 12, 2015)

Voted in, Called Out: The First Female Elected Officials

While Edith Wilson was quietly leading the country in 1919, another woman was finishing her first term as the first to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Jeannette Rankin was a Suffragette and a pacifist born near Missoula, Montana, in 1880. Before she decided to run for a congressional seat, she was a professional lobbyist for the National American Woman Suffrage Association. It was, in part, through her efforts that in 1914, Montana women gained the vote.²² While serving in Congress, Rankin became very unpopular very quickly, based on her commitment to her pacifism. She was among a very small minority (50 dissenting against 374 assenting) in Congress that voted against Woodrow Wilson's Resolution of War (which led to the America's eventual involvement in World War I).²³ She said, in an unpermitted but brief statement, as she voted that "I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for war."²⁴ The press took hold of her dissent and ran with it. She was not even safe from her own state's press. The Helena *Independent* called Rankin "a dagger in the hands of the German Propagandists, a dupe of the Kaiser, a member of the Hun army in the United States, and a crying schoolgirl."²⁵ In one statement, that article questioned her intelligence, loyalty, and her emotional stability. These are themes that female political figures have contended with ever since.

Following a tumultuous two-year stint as congresswoman, Rankin faced trouble at the hands of redistricting. She ran again for her seat, but came in third. In the following years,

²² Office of the Historian, "RANKIN, Jeannette," *History, Art & Archives*, U.S. House of Representatives, (n.d.), [http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/R/RANKIN,-Jeannette-\(R000055\)/](http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/R/RANKIN,-Jeannette-(R000055)/). (Accessed December 12, 2015)

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Johnson Lewis, Jone, "Jeannette Rankin Quotes," Jeanette Rankin (1880-1973), *About Education*, (n.d.), <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/quotes/a/Jeanette-Rankin-quotes.html>. (Accessed December 12, 2015)

²⁵ Office of the Historian, "RANKIN, Jeannette," [http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/R/RANKIN,-Jeannette-\(R000055\)/](http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/R/RANKIN,-Jeannette-(R000055)/)

Rankin dedicated herself to her pacifist projects.²⁶ She was active on many committees and conferences that focused on achieving and maintaining global peace, and was active in advocating social welfare programs. In 1940, Rankin felt pulled back into Congress, this time because of a looming war in Europe. She ran again and won over incumbent Jacob Thorkelsen, who was an outspoken Anti-Semite. Her swearing-in occurred as debate surrounding the threat of war in Europe reached its highest point. Again, Congress came to a vote on whether or not to enter the war. Rankin voted no. The resolution passed, the final count 388-1. Rankin stood alone on this matter, stating that “As a woman, I can’t go to war, and I refuse to send anyone else.”²⁷ Matt Wasniewski, a historian at the House of Representatives, says of that occasion “in terms of immediate [negative] response, I would have a hard time coming up with anything [in history] that matched that moment.”²⁸ Again, Rankin was vilified by the press, and was called “Jeanette Rankin.”²⁹ Again, her popularity plummeted and Rankin never won another term.

To say that some politicians are unpopular would be an understatement. But it is rare that politicians become so unpopular due to such a strong stance. Rankin undoubtedly lost her edge due to a very unpopular political position. But through the media, that unpopular political position became, to some extent, about gender. That’s apparent in the language and images used to tell the stories of what was, for better or worse, a determined political position.

²⁶Johnson Lewis, Jone, “Jeanette Rankin Quotes,” Jeanette Rankin (1880-1973), <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/quotes/a/Jeanette-Rankin-quotes.html>.

²⁷History.com Staff, “Jeanette Rankin casts sole vote against WWII”, History.com, A&E Networks, 2009, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/jeanette-rankin-casts-sole-vote-against-wwii>. (Accessed December 12, 2015)

²⁸Wyckoff, Whitney, “The First Woman in Congress: A Crusader for Peace,” *NPR Books*, July 14, 2011. <http://www.npr.org/2011/07/14/135521203/the-first-woman-in-congress-a-crusader-for-peace>. (Accessed December 15, 2015).

²⁹History.com Staff, “Jeanette Rankin casts sole vote against WWII,” 2009.

Hair, Hemlines, and Husbands

After Jeannette Rankin began her service in the Congress, women began to more readily take up governmental positions, and thus the media bias against female political figures began in earnest. Women took office in greater numbers as the 20th century wore on. Along with the still rare occurrence of female figures being voted into office, “widow successions” were relatively common. As of 2005, 39 women had succeeded their husbands following their deaths in the House of Representatives and eight had succeeded a husband who had died while serving the U.S. Senate.³⁰

WOMEN WHO SUCCEEDED THEIR HUSBANDS IN CONGRESS

47 women have been elected or appointed to fill congressional vacancies created by the deaths of their husbands, 8 to the U.S. Senate and 39 to the U. S. House of Representatives.

U.S. Senate - 8*

1931-45 Hattie Wyatt Caraway (D-AR)	1978-79 Maryon Pittman Allen (D-AL)	
1936-37 Rose McConnell Long (D-LA)	1978-79 Muriel Buck Humphrey (D-MN)	
1948 Vera Cahalan Bushfield (R-SD)	1992 Jocelyn Birch Burdick (D-ND)	
1960-67 Maurine Brown Neuberger (D-OR)	2001-2002 Jean Carnahan (D-MO)	

U.S. House of Representatives - 39**

1923-25 Mae Ella Nolan (R-CA)	1957-63 Kathryn Elizabeth Granahan (D-PA)	
1925-37 Florence Prag Kahn (R-CA)	1958-61 Edna Oakes Simpson (R-IL)	
1925-60 Edith Nourse Rogers (R-MA)	1961-63 Catherine Dorris Norrell (D-AR)	
1929-31 Pearl Peden Oldfield (D-AR)	1961-63 Louise Goff Reece (R-TN)	
1930-33 Effiegene Locke Wingo (D-AR)	1962-63 Corinne Boyd Riley (D-SC)	
1932-33 Willa McCord Blake Eslick (D-TN)	1964-65 Irene Bailey Baker (R-TN)	
1934-35 Marian Williams Clarke (R-NY)	1966-67 Lera Millard Thomas (D-TX)	
1938 Elizabeth Hawley Gasque (D-SC)	1972-73 Elizabeth B. Andrews (D-AL)	
1940-69 Frances Bolton (R-OH)	1973-91 Corinne “Lindy” Boggs (D-LA)	
1940-49 Margaret Chase Smith (R-ME) [†]	1973-97 Cardiss Collins (D-IL)	
1940-41 Florence Reville Gibbs (D-GA)	1975-79 Shirley N. Pettis (R-CA)	
1940-41 Clara Gooding McMillan (D-SC)	1979-93 Beverly Barton Butcher Byron (D-MD)	
1941-43 Katharine Edgar Byron (D-MD)	1982-83 Jean Ashbrook (R-OH)	
1942-43 Veronica Grace Boland (D-PA)	1983-87 Sala Burton (D-CA)	
1944-45 Willa Lybrand Fulmer (D-SC)	1985-87 Catherine S. Long (D-LA)	
1951-55 Vera Daerr Buchanan (D-PA)	1996-present Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO)	
1951-63 Marguerite Stitt Church (R-IL)	1998-present Lois Capps (D-CA)	
1951-65 Maude Elizabeth Kee (D-WV)	1998-present Mary Bono (R-CA)	
1952-75 Leonor K. Sullivan (D-MO) ^{††}	2005-present Doris Matsui (D-CA)	
1954-57 Mary Elizabeth Pruett Farrington (R-HI)		

³⁰Center for American Women & Politics, “Women Who Succeeded Their Husbands in Congress,” Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, June 2005, https://web.archive.org/web/20130710003927/http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/levels_of_office/documents/widows.pdf. (Accessed December 16, 2015)

Figure 1.1: List of widow successions in United States Congress³¹

Though these women took congressional vacancies from their husbands, many of them continued for several terms, winning those elections outright to continue. These women, alongside the women in elected positions, all faced similar challenges when it came to the media: what has come to be known as the “hair, hemlines, and husbands” phenomenon.³² This phrase has become the tagline for the media bias that perpetuates today and about which the author has dedicated so much of her energy to understanding. Essentially, it perpetuates the idea that despite these women being qualified to lead and deserving of coverage that discusses their policies and platforms, much of their coverage emphasizes the traditional role of women, which certainly does not include governing. Instead, articles and broadcast interviews often focus on appearance, attitude, and the family and relationships of that woman.

In this section, the author will explore these themes of media bias that female political figures have faced through the years. This will both provide the reader with an understanding of what this bias looks like and also with historical examples to illustrate the perpetual nature of the bias.

Husbands

Perhaps one of strongest instances of this media bias was a particular nasty scandal in the 1950s. Coya Knutson was a third-term congresswoman from Minnesota. Her political biography was strong. She had won a seat in the Minnesota House of Representatives and occupied that position for four years, between 1950 and 1954. When she ran in a 1954 primary election, she won, and went on to the general election. After a very labor-intensive fight and her eventual

³¹ Ibid.

³² Prouty, Jill, “Hair, Hemlines and Husbands,” *Fayette Woman*, June 6, 2010, <http://fayettewoman.com/hhusbands.html>. (Accessed December 15, 2015) (Prouty 2010)

backing by Dwight Eisenhower himself, she won the congressional seat. She made an impact almost immediately and gained something of reputation for her bulldog-like approach to politics. Her primary legislative focus was agriculture and she rose to acclaim in that area, becoming the first woman to sit on the U.S. House Agriculture Committee, which at that time was a position of great power. Her campaign manager and later her legislative aide remembers her thus: “she just asked people for stuff and she’d get it. [...] She just had the run of the place.”³³ Alas, her ubiquity in Congress would not last.

Aside from the challenges in her professional career, Knutson faced other challenges as well. Her life in Washington was notoriously lonely, as she was without a female cohort on the Hill. She was known to go to a nearby airport and watch the planes during her free times. Due to the lack of female companionship and pressure for her husband to not socialize with her male companions, this was an activity she could do without political or professional repercussions.³⁴

Knutson was up for re-election in 1958. Shortly before a district convention, at which it was necessary for Coya to impress, a letter was circulated to the assembled press. The signature was Congresswoman Knutson’s husband, from whom she was estranged. The killing stroke of the letter was this quote:

"Coya, I want you to tell the people of the 9th District this Sunday that you are through in politics. That you want to go home and make a home for your husband and son. As your husband I compel you to do this. I'm tired of being torn apart from my family. I'm sick and tired of having you run around with other men all the time and not your husband. I love you, honey."

³³Gunderson, Dan, “Coya’s Story,” *Minnesota Public Radio*, May 3, 2004, http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2004/05/16_gundersond_coya/. (Accessed December 16, 2015)

³⁴Reeves, Richard, “Putting Women in Their Place: Home”, *American Heritage*, December 16, 1998, <http://www.uepress.com/richard-reeves/1998/12/16/putting-women-in-their-place-home>, (Accessed March 14, 2016)

As one journalist puts it “the phrase [Coya, come home] would forever define Coya Knutson.”³⁵ It is now, nearly 60 years ago, almost unanimously agreed that Andy Knutson did not write the body of the letter, that it was in fact written in conspiracy by Coya detractors to prevent her continued participation in government. National press took up the story and it became clear very quickly that Coya would lose the election.



Figure 1.2: Headline from New York Times Article, November 1958³⁶

This coverage presented Coya as a woman “dallying” with politics, but whose real place was at home with her family. The whole incident occurred because Coya Knutson was a strong leader, who challenged and obstructed her mostly male peers. Fitting, then, that the attack that ended her career was built entirely upon her home life. The letter that brought her down reminded readers of national press that Coya was a woman first, and not a political force. It destroyed her credibility by perpetuating the idea that her role in the U.S. government was

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Wehrwin, Austin, “Minnesota Says: Coya Come Home”, *The New York Times*, November 6, 1958. 23.

secondary to her role in her family, when in truth, that was her own decision to make. “But who will care for the children” was a popular refrain as in those times, a woman in politics was seen as neglecting her children.³⁷

Coya Knutson’s story brings the concept of spouses to the foreground of this discussion. Though there aren’t many stories like hers, in which her husband effectively destroys a political figure’s career, husbands have been objects of fascination and distraction to the press. It isn’t uncommon for female candidates or political figures to be judged based on public information about their husbands. The husbands garner particular mention because of the frequency with which the spouses of female political figures receive kinder coverage than the figure herself.³⁸ While the greater problem in that is denying the woman **agency**, the press doesn’t consider her a viable candidate on her own merits. Her family situation also must be assessed—which is highly irregular in the case of males in similar position—it also poses immediate threats to a campaign or legislative agenda. Hillary Clinton obviously has dealt with this proclivity on several occasions. The “husband” was also an object of fascination during the 2008 election, as Vice Presidential hopeful Sarah Palin’s husband was actively covered by media. The author will explore the careers of both Clinton and Palin later.

Another striking example of this spouse fixation is Geraldine Ferraro, a congresswoman from New York, whose political biography is prolific by any standards. She served for NYC’s 19th district from 1979 to 1985 and as United States Ambassador to the UN Commission on Human Rights from 1993-1996 under Bill Clinton. She was selected in 1984 as running mate in

³⁷ Kornblutt, Anne, *Notes from the Cracked Ceiling: Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and What it Will Take for Women to Win* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69

Walter Mondale’s presidential run. This was historic, as it was the first time a woman had been selected to run for this office.³⁹



Figure 1.3: Campaign button from 1984 presidential election⁴⁰

There was great hope among female voters that a feminist agenda might finally become a priority and that American women might be advanced through legislation after years of being either ignored or damaged by male leaders. An editorial in *The Nation* read as follows:

The nomination of Geraldine Ferraro as the Democrats’ Vice-Presidential candidate has an importance that transcends symbolic politics or cynical gesture, even if it contains those elements as well. Many women, including those on the left, are moved by Ferraro’s selection.... But the feminist content of Ferraro’s candidacy is more than a matter of identification and pride. Because Antonetta Ferraro, a garment worker, struggled as a single parent to support her children, Geraldine Ferraro has fought for legislation to achieve economic equality for women throughout her terms in Congress.... The Democrats’ choice of Ferraro recognizes years of organizing by Democratic women leaders and feminist groups. It also recognizes the potential women’s vote. Women have been badly hurt by the Reagan Administration’s policies, from poor women denied public assistance to office workers in the public sector whose jobs have been eliminated. In order to win, the Democrats will have to capture the “gender gap” vote—the women who oppose the Administration on foreign policy, military spending, arms control and women’s rights. They will also have to appeal to women for whom

³⁹Morrow, Lance, “Why Not a Woman: Democrats think about balancing their ticket in an unorthodox way”, *Time*, June 4, 1984, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,951137-2,00.html>. (Accessed December 16, 2015).

⁴⁰SheSaid, “My Story of the HerStory of Geraldine Ferraro”, *Out With Mommy*, March 28, 2011, <https://outwithmommy.wordpress.com/2011/03/>. (Accessed December 16, 2015)

the gender gap has more to do with economics than ideology. Whether poor women and black women will respond to Ferraro's presence on the ticket remains to be seen. In the first weeks of the campaign, Ferraro has participated in the Democrats' celebration of family and flag, and as Mondale's running mate she stands on the conservative platform she helped shape. But Antonetta Ferraro's daughter is not an American Margaret Thatcher or a female Tip O'Neill. Her prominent role in a Mondale Administration would secure more attention for the feminist agenda—not just the mightily assaulted freedom of choice but equal pay, funding for day-care centers, paid maternity leaves, restoration of cuts in public assistance and a renewed Justice Department attack on sexual discrimination in employment and other areas. Fritz Mondale may wind up with more than he bargained for.⁴¹

What began as an exciting announcement, one that seemed to unify many women in the United States, soon turned to what seemed like a witch hunt, as media began to dig, unsurprisingly, into Ferraro's personal life. The investigation of Ferraro began by questioning her credibility in governing. She was asked all manner of questions, in which her gender almost invariably came up. Of these were gems like "Are you tough enough?" and "do you think in any way the Soviets might be tempted to try and take advantage of you simply because you are a woman?"⁴² This helps to prove the tendency that media, and voters at large, have to question a woman's credibility to lead on the basis of her gender.

The real damage, however, came when the media began to dig into the finances of Ferraro and her husband, John Zaccaro. *The New York Times* reported that it had found some murky details in those financial documents.⁴³ They reviewed a 1979 investigation into Ferraro's campaign financing and Ferraro's Congressional financial disclosures, which did not include Zaccaro's. Ferraro maintained that his records were exempt and that she was right to release only

⁴¹Kreitner, Richard, "July 12, 1984: Walter Mondale Announces Geraldine Ferraro as the Democratic Vice-Presidential Candidate," *The Nation*, July 15, 2015, <http://www.thenation.com/article/july-12-1984-walter-mondale-announces-geraldine-ferraro-as-the-democratic-vice-presidential-candidate/>. (Accessed December 17, 2015)

⁴²Hall-Jamieson, Kathleen, *Beyond the Double-Bind: Women in Leadership* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), 129

⁴³Blumenthal, Ralph, "Rep. Ferraro's Transactions Detailed in Public Records," *The New York Times*, July 26, 1984, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/07/26/us/rep-ferraro-s-transactions-detailed-in-public-records.html>. (Accessed December 17, 2015)

hers. The issue was that *The New York Times* article alleged that Zacarro and his business associates had in part financed Ferraro's various campaigns. By linking Ferraro's trustworthiness to that of her husband, the media managed to cause severe damage to her campaign. The Mondale-Ferraro ticket lost the election to juggernaut candidate Ronald Reagan. There is speculation that the loss was due partly to the amount of time spent discussing Ferraro's financial records, rather than actual campaign issues.

Ferraro's situation was almost exactly mirrored in 2006, when Senate hopeful from Missouri Claire McCaskill "weathered an almost identical inquisition over the business operations of her husband."⁴⁴ McCaskill, who before her time in government was a prosecutor, faced great public scrutiny in her campaign for U.S. senate. Anne Kornblutt⁴⁵, author of *Notes from the Cracked Ceiling*, alleges, "Like Hillary Clinton [and] Geraldine Ferraro before her, Claire McCaskill would spend an inordinate amount of time defending her husband's work."⁴⁶ In both her failed 2004 run and in her successful 2006 run, it was alleged that McCaskill had accepted a loan for her campaign, which she had, from her husband, who had been under criticism for the care provided in the chain of nursing homes he provided.⁴⁷ Not only was McCaskill forced to explain her involvement in the whole affair, which was, importantly, completely legal, but she had to account for what was going in the satellite operations of her husband's business. Again, attention was diverted from her ability and strength to govern as her news coverage and airtime was forced back into the territory of her personal life.

⁴⁴Kornblutt, *Notes from the Cracked Ceiling*, 127

⁴⁵Anne E. Kornblut is the author of *Notes from the Cracked Ceiling: Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin and What it will take for a Woman to Win*. This book was foundational in the author's research for this project and provided a great deal of historical context around the issue of biased media coverage for female political candidates.

⁴⁶Kornblutt, *Notes from the Cracked Ceiling*, 166

⁴⁷Ibid., 167

Appearance

As frequently as the “husband” tenet of “hair, hemlines, and husbands” is given airtime, even more frequent are discussions of “hair” and “hemlines.” Perhaps the greatest incidence of sexism in political news coverage is the never-ending discussion of the appearance of female political figures. Their clothes, hair, physique, and body language are all put on trial regularly. Hillary Clinton once said, “If I want to knock a story off the front page, I just change my hairstyle.”⁴⁸ Former Secretary Clinton points to a real challenge for female candidates and political figures. Despite their sophisticated legislative agendas and more-than-ample qualifications, it is their physical appearance that gets the coverage. It goes without saying that their male counterparts do not, by and large, receive this kind of coverage. The author will further explain the damage caused by this kind of coverage later, but suffice to say, if the only message an American voter hears is about the shade of lipstick a candidate wears, or the way her new haircut makes her look “severe,” it is unlikely that that voter will see past the superficiality of that story and attempt to discover her political agenda. This tendency is ubiquitous to female political figures but there are two recent instances of it that drive the point home.

Kirsten Gillibrand began her career as an elected official in 2006, when she ran for and won the seat for New York’s 20th congressional district against a four-term incumbent John Sweeney.⁴⁹ She won again in 2008, but left her position after being appointed to Hillary Clinton’s recently vacated senate seat.⁵⁰⁵¹ She served in an appointment capacity for a little over a year before winning a special election in 2010 and she then ran, and won her own full term as

⁴⁸Ibid., 37

⁴⁹New York State Board of Elections, “Congressional Vote – Nov. 7, 2006”, November 2006, http://www.elections.ny.gov/NYSBOE/elections/2006/general/2006_cong.pdf. (Accessed December 17, 2015)

⁵⁰New York State Board of Elections, “NYS Board of Elections Rep. in Congress Election Returns Nov. 4, 2008”, New York State Board Elections, Nov. 2, 2008, <http://www.elections.ny.gov/NYSBOE/elections/2008/General/USCongress08.pdf>. (Accessed December 17, 2015)

⁵¹Silverleib, Alan, “NY Governor Names Clinton Successor,” *CNN*, January 23, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/01/23/gillibrand.profile/>. (Accessed December 18, 2015).

Senator in 2012 with a huge 72.2% of the vote, a percentage unprecedented in New York Election history.⁵²

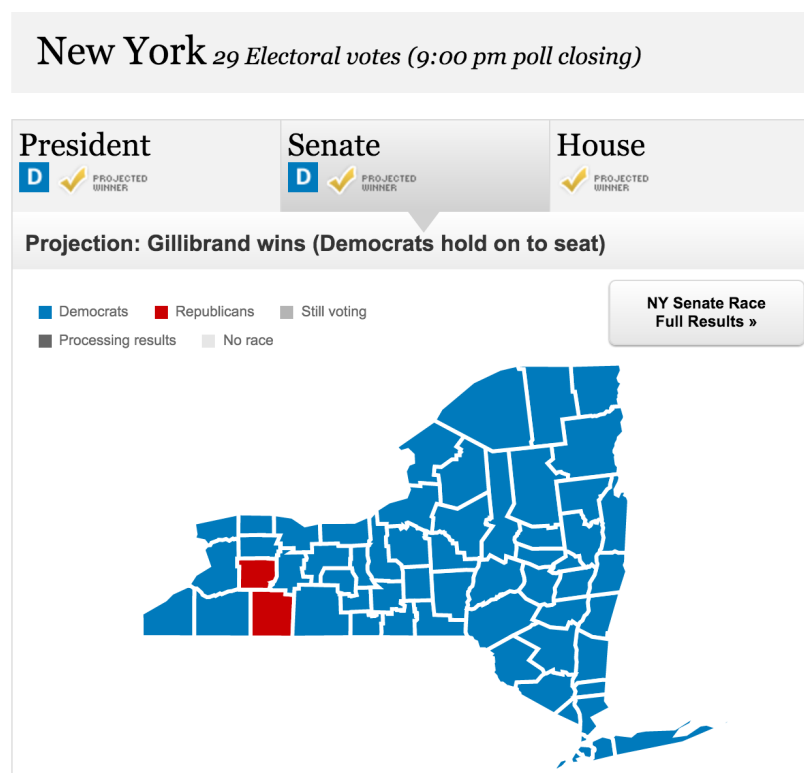


Figure 1.4: CNN Exit Poll depicts Gillibrand's near sweep of New York State⁵³

In each of the positions she has held, she has excelled and has, on many occasions, been singled out as a potential presidential candidate for 2020 or beyond. She is not universally popular, of course, as is the case with any politician. She has found success, however, and has proven herself to be a legitimate and formidable leader.

Despite this, coverage of Gillibrand often reflects not only her gender, but also the gendered way that her detractors, even on occasion, her supporters discuss her is reflected in the media. In the halls of Congress, Gillibrand is referred to as Tracy Flick—referencing a character

⁵² Election Center, “Races & Results: New York”, *CNN Politics*, November 12, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/election/2012/results/state/NY/#senate>. (Accessed December 17, 2015) (CNN Politics 2012)

⁵³ Ibid.

from the film *Election*.⁵⁴ The character is “over-eager, blonde, bubbly and viciously competitive.”⁵⁵ The analogy is damaging enough on its own. Consider that a man with same traits would likely be considered passionate, charming, and ambitious, and would never mention any physical characteristics. But the political media does a disservice to Gillibrand as a political force when they choose to cover *that* particular story. Likability is vitally important to the election and re-election chances for female political figures, as the author will discuss later. *Politico*, for example, wrote a piece on the nickname without mentioning any of Gillibrand’s political triumphs. Instead, it focused on her personality, while sharing this photo:



Figure 1.5: Politico, January 23, 2009⁵⁶

Rather than one of hundreds of professional-looking photos that are available, this photo was chosen, in which Gillibrand looks overly effusive and very much like the Tracy Flick caricature that the article was debating. Clearly, in this instance, Politico was uninterested in a more evolved depiction of this female political figure.

⁵⁴ Patrick O’Connor and Glenn Thrush, “Gillibrand unpopular among peers,” *Politico*, January 23, 2009, <http://www.politico.com/story/2009/01/gillibrand-unpopular-among-peers-017877>. (Accessed December 17, 2015).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Carly Fiorina's ongoing struggle with the political media is another example of the appearance obsession. Though Fiorina has never held public office, she is faring relatively well in a crowded Republican Presidential primary.⁵⁷ Despite being one of few candidates in that process with a well-formed legislative agenda, Fiorina's biggest challenge seems to be to get the media to focus on that agenda, rather than on her face. Fiorina has a long and notorious career in business, the peak of which was her time as CEO of computer giant HP. Though her success there is debated, she has been included on many "Most Powerful Women" lists, from sources like Time, Fortune, and Forbes. Despite this acumen and demonstrated leadership capabilities, much of Fiorina's current coverage discusses her appearance.

Some of this imbalance is due to Republican front-runner, Donald Trump. In a profile with *Rolling Stone*, he reacts to a clip of Fiorina speaking about the race. In a statement documented by many major news sources, both political and popular, he says, "Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next president?"⁵⁸ Trump's comments get right at the center of the challenge for female candidates: in the minds of many, physical appearance is a factor in female political figures ability to succeed. The media took Trump's outburst and ran with it, and since then, Fiorina's face has been at the center of attention. News of Trump's comments lasted for weeks, combined with news of Fiorina's response. Reuter's dedicated an entire blog post to analyzing Fiorina's facial expressions, a subject which hasn't been explored with a male candidate...⁵⁹

⁵⁷ As of December 2015. Currently, Fiorina is still in the top tier of potential candidates.

⁵⁸ Estepa, Jessica, "Donald Trump on Carly Fiorina: 'Look at that Face!'" *USA Today*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2015/09/10/trump-fiorina-look-face/71992454/>. (Accessed December 17, 2015)

⁵⁹ Hill, Dan, "Carly Fiorina's disgust is written all over her face," *Reuters*, November 4, 2015, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/11/03/carly-fiorinas-disgust-is-written-all-over-her-face/>. (Accessed December 18, 2015)

Only a few weeks later, feminists the nation over sighed in defeat as hosts of the popular television show *The View* compared Carly Fiorina's face to a Halloween mask.⁶⁰ This was a particularly upsetting incidence of media bias because of the source of the attack. One of the greatest obstacles to women succeeding as elected officials and certainly to equal coverage in media is *other women*. This idea will be explored in greater detail in the chapter to come, but suffice to say, there is some truly disheartening about the lack of solidarity in this area. Fiorina may or may not win the Republican primary, but nevertheless she deserves fairness and respect for embarking on the journey that she has. No voter or constituency will ever know what Carly Fiorina, Candidate for President, can do for them if the only news they hear about her is criticizing her facial expressions.

2008 — A Year That Will Live in Infamy

When a relatively unknown Governor from Alaska was tapped as Vice President for John McCain in his 2008 bid for President, a media circus began. Sarah Palin's VP run that year was the perfect storm of biased media coverage that was almost entirely focused on her physical attributes. In the over three months that followed, media and voters alike criticized and satirized Palin. Though her appearance was the prominent theme in this coverage, her intelligence was, rightly, also questioned. Katie Couric said of those months, "Like her or not, one the great lessons of that campaign is the continued and accepted role of sexism in American life. Particularly in the media."⁶¹

⁶⁰ Agness, Karin, "If Carly Fiorina Were a Liberal Would 'The View' Still Attack Her?" *Forbes: Politics*, November 5, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/karinagness/2015/11/05/carly-fiorina-feminism-the-view/>. (Accessed December 18, 2015)

⁶¹ Kornblutt, *Notes from the Cracked Ceiling*, 70

Couric was right. Palin’s very presence on the ticket was a result of misguided attempts by McCain strategists to regain lost voter groups. The result was catastrophic for Palin and for the campaign. According to Anne Kornblutt, “Palin was chosen by McCain’s all-male staff, for qualities that they deemed electable — most of which turned out to be physical attributes [and] not one female strategist was involved in the selection process.”⁶² The voter groups in question, the ones that this choice was meant to appeal, were younger voters and women. Kornblutt says of the selection “had Republican women met to discuss the Palin choice ahead of time, they might have cautioned McCain that women are usually held to a higher standard, especially on questions of toughness and competence.”⁶³ The Palin choice was one born out of poor critical thinking and covert sexism. The mentality seemed to be “let’s spice up this campaign by showing off how sexy the Republican Party is.” Palin became a symbol for that attempt, but when it became apparent how unqualified she was for the job, nearly everyone turned against her. Coverage was downright cruel in many cases and attacked her appearance, even her family and personal lives. [Author’s Note: this thesis was researched and crafted before Palin’s endorsement of Donald Trump and does not address that situation.]

No discussion of media bias against female political figures would be complete without mention of the other female candidate in the 2008 Presidential Election Cycle. There is perhaps no figure as vital to this conversation, or as relevant to the current status of female political figures in the U.S. than Hillary Clinton. Volumes have been written about Clinton’s struggle with the media, so the author won’t delve too deeply into Clinton’s story.⁶⁴ Every challenge described in this chapter is one that Clinton has faced at some point in her career. Her peers in

⁶² Ibid., 93

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ For further reading on Hillary Clinton and her relationship and history with the media, please see *Notes from the Cracked Ceiling* by Anne E. Kornblutt, *The Girls in the Van* by Beth Harpaz, *Hillary Clinton in the News: Gender and Authenticity in American Politics* or either of Clinton’s most recent biographies (*Hard Choices* and *Living History*). Countless of academic articles have also been written on Clinton.

government have questioned her ability to effectively govern, the media has criticized her appearance and her demeanor, and American voters have vocally mistrusted her since she gained public attention as First Lady in late 1992. The author contends that a great deal of the discomfort that the world has with Clinton is predicated in institutional sexism and the unprecedented nature of her leadership roles and political successes and on her seemingly equal footing with Bill Clinton, a rare quality for political wives. Regardless of cause, it remains to be seen whether, in this latest run, Hillary Clinton can overcome those challenges and secure the office of President. In her 2008 election, it was a media problem, coupled with Barack Obama's own unprecedented presence that led to her failure.

The author would like to briefly acknowledge that fair coverage of female political figure does, of course, exist. Some coverage *does* focus solely on issues and policies of these women and makes value judgments based on that information. The 2016 Presidential Race, for example, has inspired more fair coverage than ever, though gendered language is still a favored tool of many forms of media. As much as 2008 was a year of intensely sexist media coverage, there was coverage that allowed U.S. voters to make decisions based on female candidate's ability to lead, rather than their appearance or personal life. An excellent example of this is the now infamous interview of Sarah Palin by Katie Couric. Though the information it imparted was damaging to Palin, the format of the interview did not indulge in gender stereotypes and superficial content. The interview was undoubtedly a turning point in the McCain/Palin campaign. In it, Katie Couric presses Palin on campaign issues like foreign policy, the economy, and on her preferred news sources. Palin subsequently responds with what was widely considered a disastrous performance.

She failed to impart any real information at all on her viewpoints and as the interview went on, she seemed more and more at a loss to respond succinctly or even coherently.⁶⁵

This interview later inspired a slew of parody, analysis and was, in the end, partially blamed John McCain's failed campaign. As disastrous as the interview was for Palin, it is an example of coverage that was about issues, policies, and Palin's ability to function under pressure. It gave audiences insight into a potential leader, even if that leader was found wanting. Couric was praised for her moderation of the interview. Objectively, the interview was bad for Sarah Palin and her campaign, but it was fair. It treated her as a political figure.

It should be noted that this interview did later result in sexist coverage. Coverage of the interview itself and its fallout indulged in stereotypes like "ditz" and "airhead" and made inference to Palin being just a pretty face. The interview itself did maintain a certain level of professionalism and focused on Sarah Palin's ideas, rather than her appearance.

American history is littered with examples of media sexism. Whether it is using gendered language to describe a woman's political approach, criticizing her physical appearance — as if that were in some way relevant to her ability to lead — or attacking her for "abandoning" her family, media is a real challenge for these female political figures and always has been.

Understanding that media is often a reflection of the society in which it exists is only one step in solving the problem.

Chapter Two: Understanding the Implications

Today's media landscape is vast and expresses any number of opposing viewpoints at any given time. To be sure, much of the sexist coverage of female candidates is just that,

⁶⁵ Sarah Palin, "CBS Exclusive: Gov. Sarah Palin," Interviewed by Katie Couric. *CBS Evening News*, September 24, 2008, late edition, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZVh_u5RyiU. (Accessed December 18, 2015)

someone expressing her/his opinion on a given individual — usually an opinion inflamed by some kind of partisan leaning. The author is not refusing the First Amendment right of all Americans to express their thinking through free speech. She is, however, arguing that there are dangerous implications to using a certain type of language and style to describe female political figures. Hers is not the only opinion or argument on that front, however. There is a sentiment that comes mostly from the more conservative media landscape, that gender bias is really a non-issue. Howard Kurtz, the host of Fox News Channel's *Media Buzz News Watch* is one such individual. In a well-publicized post on his blog, Kurtz comments on the release of Hillary Clinton's biography *Hard Choices* and the gender bias she alludes to in its pages:

“My take is this: Let's say Hillary's people are right and that the press is petty, sensationalist, often unfair and sometimes mean to women? Deal with it. It's like complaining about bad weather. Every candidate has to cope with an adversarial media.”⁶⁶

The author can speculate about the privileged position from which Kurtz, a white, male, leader in his field speaks, but suffice to say, others share his opinion. Is this issue really important? Or is the media bias that political women face just an extension of the media's overall toughness on and disdain for politicians? There is energetic discussion over the appropriate time and place for political correctness. Are these women and the people to study their media coverage just being too sensitive?

The following chapter explains the implications of this media bias, as well as to put the issue in context by examining other countries and their female representation. It will make use of some of the excellent scholarly research done on the topic of women in government and will

⁶⁶ Kurtz, Howard, “Hillary's Armor: Why she's so wary of the press that she leaked part of her book,” *Media Buzz*, Fox News, May 28, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2014/05/28/hillarys-armor-why-shes-so-wary-press-that-leaked-part-her-book.html>. (Accessed December 18, 2015)

show the real and quantitative effect of this media bias on the frequency of women in government.

What's the Problem?

The author argues that despite Kurtz's argument and those like it, this media bias is damaging to female political figures and that it is indeed an important area to study and improve. The problem inherent in this bias is that it acts as two things, a barrier to success as a leader and equally as important, as a deterrent for other women to enter politics and try their hand at being leaders. Both of these stymie the growth of women in government and, thus, deny women in the United States representation by someone who can truly understand and advocate for their worldview. In *Notes from the Cracked Ceiling*, Anne Kornblutt uses a particular set of statistics to illustrate this. She says, "In 2010, women occupied 23% of statewide offices and 17% of seats in the U.S. Congress were held by women.⁶⁷ Women are 1/3 less likely to be recruited into politics than men. But women are 50% of the population."⁶⁸ Note that with the most up to date leadership statistics, the United States is ranked behind Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Nepal.⁶⁹

The point that Kornblutt is trying to make, with which the author emphatically agrees, is that women in the United States are not equally represented. Their decisions, on vitally important issues like abortion, health care, paid leave, and pay equality, are being made, by and large, by men, who have no personal experience with these issues and as a result, no credibility with which to make them. Marie Wilson, founder of the now-defunct White House Project, says it succinctly when she says, "You can't be what you can't see. So, we need to start electing more

⁶⁷ This number has been updated by Project Parity is now 19%.

⁶⁸ Kornblutt, *Notes from the Cracked Ceiling*, 7-8

⁶⁹ Political Parity, "Why Women," Political Parity, (n.d.), <https://www.politicalparity.org/why-women/>. (Accessed December 18, 2015)

women so that we actually have a chance for political parity by 2025 and have a government that is reflective of the population.”⁷⁰ A report by *The Nation* purports that at the current rate, it will take *nearly 500 years* for women to reach fair representation in government.⁷² A government that does not represent its people cannot serve them effectively. One needs to look no further than the recent instances of racial inequality in the U.S. or to the long-standing and hard-won battle for marriage equality to see that a government made up of a small percentage of the overall U.S. population isn’t enough.

You may ask, how does all this relate to the coverage discrepancy? If a more evenly gendered government is the goal, then gendered bias is a barrier to its achievement and to the advancement of women in government.

There is evidence that this media bias actually does limit a woman’s ability to govern effectively. Name It Change It, a joint project between the Women’s Media Center and She Should Run, has conducted research that shows what superficial coverage of female political figures does to that politician’s poll numbers. Specifically, the group proved that when the media focuses on a woman candidate’s appearance, her poll numbers drop, regardless of whether the mention was a positive or negative mention.⁷³

⁷⁰ The White House Project was a non-profit which sought to increase female representation in government and business. It is now defunct.

⁷¹ Rattigan, Kaitlin, “3 Reasons Why We Need More Women in Government,” *Take the Lead*, November 3, 2014, <http://www.taketheleadwomen.com/blog/3-reasons-why-we-need-more-women-in-government/>. (Accessed December 17, 2015)

⁷² Hill, Steven, “Why Does the US Still Have So Few Women in Office,” *The Nation*, March 7, 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/why-does-us-still-have-so-few-women-office/>. (Accessed December 18, 2015)

⁷³ Lake, Celinda, et al., “An Examination of the Impact of Media Coverage of Women Candidates’ Appearance”, Lake Research Partners, March 2013, <http://www.nameitchangeit.org/pages/4824>. (Accessed November 12, 2015)

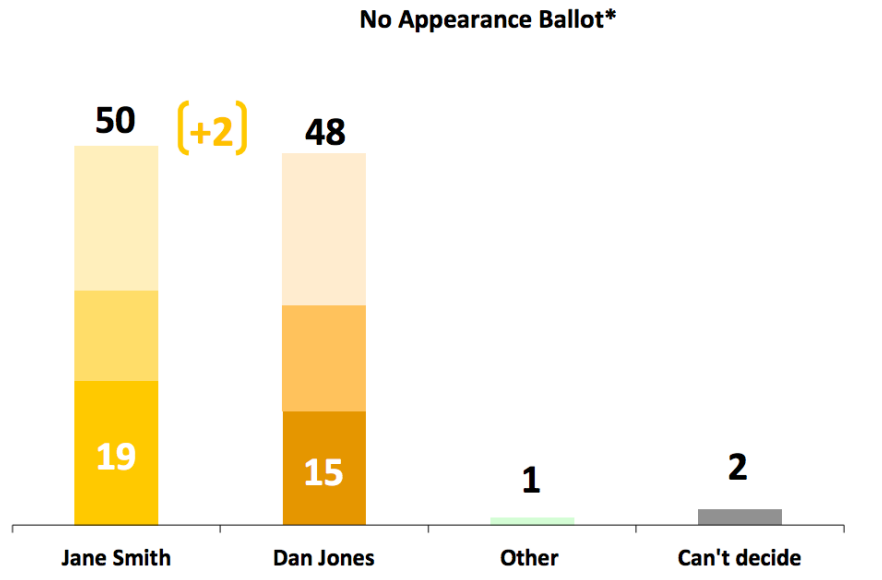


Figure 2.1 Results of Name It, Change It, no appearance ballot⁷⁴

Figure 2.1 shows how study participants voted when they had read coverage of two fictional candidates that had no mention of appearance in it. Jane Smith, the female candidate, won the election by two points.

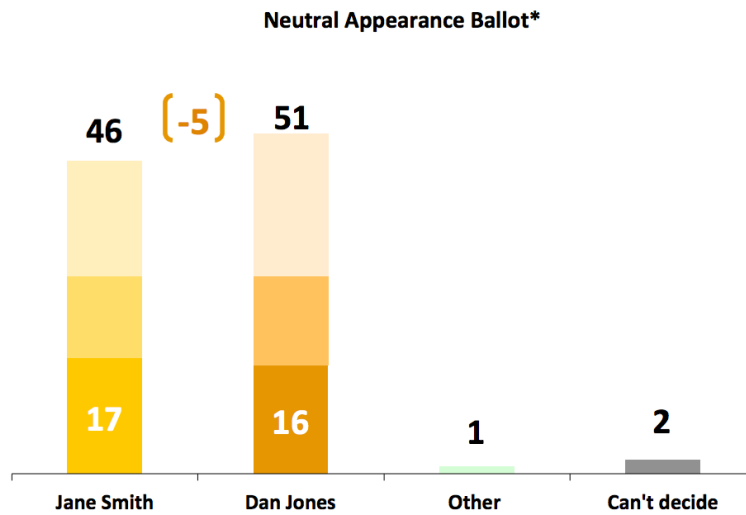


Figure 2.2 Results of Name It, Change It, neutral appearance ballot⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ibid., 19

⁷⁵ Ibid., 22

Figure 2.2 above shows that even a neutral mention of appearance in coverage negatively impacts the female candidate. Above, you can see that with that mention, Candidate Smith loses the election that she previously won, by 5 points.

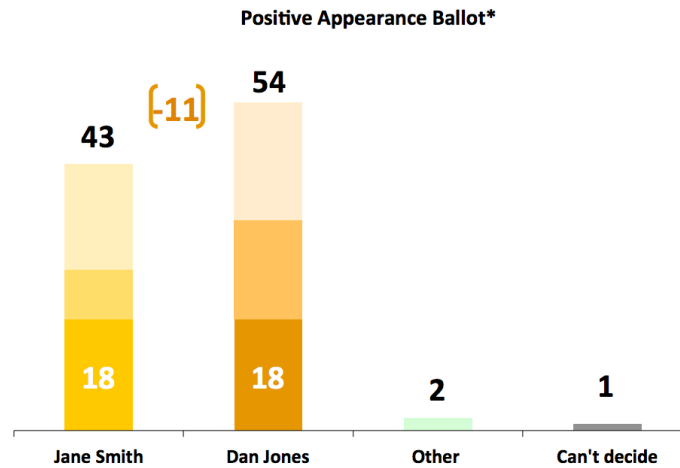


Figure 2.3 Results of Name It, Change It, positive appearance ballot⁷⁶

Figure 2.3 shows that even a positive mention about appearance (a compliment or good review) can have a devastating impact on a candidate's poll numbers.

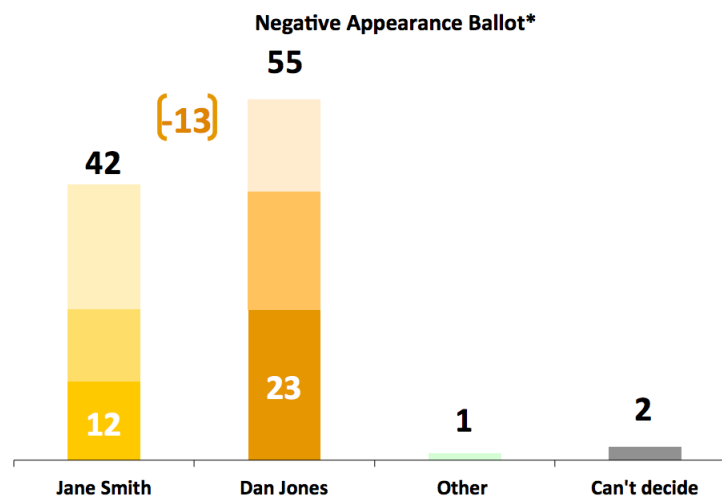


Figure 2.4 Results of Name It, Change It, negative appearance ballot⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid., 25

⁷⁷ Ibid., 28

Finally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the worst damage that can be done by appearance comments comes in the form of negative commentary. In the study, the largest point gap appeared when the female candidate's physical appearance was described in a negative way.

Another study about more generally sexist language and its effect on women candidates proved that negative language does indeed damage voters' perception that that candidate is qualified. This referred to language like "ice queen" and "bitch." These studies are vitally important because they quantitatively prove that this type of coverage has an immediate, not to mention negative, effect on that candidate's chances at success, in a way that it does not for a male candidate.

The second component of the problem is that the harsh political media environment deters women from entering the political arena in the first place. Not only are women not encouraged to run, as men are by peers and family, according to an American University study but they are also made acutely aware of the challenges they face.⁷⁸ A report in the *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance* states that "the biased media coverage that often reinforces gender stereotypes often serves as a pivotal deterrent for aspiring female politicians."⁷⁹ Former U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano echoed this sentiment, saying "I see so many younger women who say: 'I want to grow up to be the 'policy person', or 'I want to help with the campaign organization or this and that'. And I say, 'Well, why don't you just run?' Why aren't *you* the candidate?' I think we have really educated women well on how hard it is."⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox, "Girls Just Wanna Not Run: The Gender Gap in Young Americans' Political Ambition," Women & Politics Institute, American University, March 2013, https://www.american.edu/spa/wpi/upload/Girls-Just-Wanna-Not-Run_Policy-Report.pdf. (Accessed December 18, 2015)

⁷⁹ Adams, Kimberly, "The Naked Truth: The Media's Role in Undermining Female Political Candidates," *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance*, No. 2.4 (2011), page 3

⁸⁰ Kornblutt, *Notes From the Cracked Ceiling*, 230

The author would like to briefly discuss the very real impact of any news coverage on its audience and subsequently, the importance of accuracy and discretion in coverage. There are several time-tested and peer-reviewed theories on the social effects of media. These are helpful in understanding how biased media coverage creates barriers for female political figures. Two theories that aid in analysis of this coverage are the agenda-setting theory and framing theory. The author will briefly describe each theory before providing a contextual example of how it relates to female political figures.

Agenda-setting refers to “the ability [of the news media] to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda.”⁸¹ This is an older theory, having been discussed as early as the 1920s, but bears consideration still today. The theory is predicated on two suppositions. The first is that the media does not reflect reality. Rather, it shapes reality, as perceived by its various reading, watching, and listening audiences.⁸² The second supposition is that media attention on particular subjects leads those same audiences to believe that those subjects have comparatively greater importance.⁸³

If media sets the agenda, if it decides what is important, as this theory purports, then biased media coverage of female political figures *does* indeed pose a threat to that politician. If media continues to cover the appearance and personal lives of these women, then audiences will prioritize those stories and those superficial qualities will become part of the agenda. This process would certainly explain the state of political media examined in this project. Though strides have been made toward unbiased coverage, mostly likely owing to the advent of the “comments section,” gendered coverage certainly still exists and still reinforces

⁸¹ Maxwell McCombs and Amy Reynolds, “News Influence on Our Pictures of the World,” *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 2008

⁸² University of Twente, “Agenda Setting Theory” *Mass Media: Theory Clusters*, University of Twente, 2010, https://www.utwente.nl/cw/theorieenoverzicht/Theory%20Clusters/Mass%20Media/Agenda-Setting_Theory/. (Accessed December 18, 2015) (University of Twente 2010)

⁸³ Ibid.

counterproductive gender stereotypes. It stands to reason that if coverage were based on policy and issues, then eventually, that kind of coverage would dictate the conversation. Balanced, unbiased coverage of female political figures is needed, not only to normalize these women in the public eye, but also to prioritize accuracy and issue-focused reporting.

Framing theory is a more recent academic area in media studies, and has, in the opinions of some, even replaced agenda-setting as the predominant theory in the field. Others see framing as merely a phase of agenda setting.⁸⁴ According to media scholar S.D. Reese, “framing refers to the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences.”⁸⁵ Essentially this theory suggests that media not only focuses on particular subjects, as the agenda-setting theory suggests, but it also places those subjects within a field of meaning.⁸⁶ How a subject is presented will inextricably influence how an audience thinks about that subject. This theory is related to nuance in media coverage. Many elements, like tone, word choice, and ideological angle make up a “frame” and influence the total impression that an audience member receives upon consuming that media. Reese gives several examples of frames that exist within political coverage. He says that “horse race” political coverage is pervasive—who’s ahead in the polls and when—and thus, that view of the political process is the standard in the public.⁸⁷ Another example he gives is coverage of racial issues. For years, Reese suggests, that conversation has been framed as one of winners and losers, and so, that is the widespread ideology.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ S.D. Reese, 1st Edition, *Framing Public Life* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 83, https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=LhaQAQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=framing+theory+s.d+reese&ots=91SY_DWw-L&sig=HiosiCUUrh1zvROAXogkPeKdOmg#v=onepage&q=framing%20refers%20to&f=false. (Accessed February 5, 2016)

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 7

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 12

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

If coverage of a given female political figure is framed by a viewpoint that holds gender stereotypes, and that frame remains consistent and pervasive, it can result in a coverage blackout. Reese warns “the framing principle may generate a coverage blackout, yielding little discourse to analyze.”⁸⁹ In the case of female political figures and their coverage, the framing principle has been the irregularity and unfamiliarity of women running for office and the ingrained gender norms that maintain them. This influences coverage and results in biased media coverage. This frame then influences readers, who then perceive their reality accordingly. In this case, since female political figures are framed as unusual and distinctly different from their male counterparts, they seem that way to audiences.

These theories both prove one thing: media influences society’s realities through complex sociological and cultural processes. The issue of biased media coverage exists in something of a cycle. The media impacts the political figure, the audience influences the media, the media frames reality for the audience, and the politician relies on the audience for election and support. Understanding that cycle is essential as it leads to the barriers that are created by media for female political figures.

Do We Care?

The best, most effective tactic to solve this problem would be to suddenly engage all Americans of voting age and not only show them the problem, but encourage them to be a part of the solution. This would be a challenge for any nation equal to the U.S. in terms of size and scale. The United States, however, has an absolutely abysmal level of political apathy. Take for example, the 2014 election cycle. It boasted the worst voter turnout in 72 years, with alarmingly low percentages casting a ballot. In California, New York, and Texas, the U.S.’s three largest

⁸⁹ Reese, *Framing Public Life*, 13

states, less than a third of eligible voters participated. Overall, national turnout was 36.6%.⁹⁰

With such grim numbers of participation, it is no great leap to assume that generally, American voters won't care about an issue like unequal media coverage. Americans are particularly disenfranchised by what the *New York Times* calls "the relentlessly negative tone of the campaigns."⁹¹

Another proclivity of both the media and American voters is their appetite for sensationalism. One has to look no further than the Trump-mania of the latter half of 2015 and early 2016 to find evidence of this statement. For an example closer to home however, two segments of Sarah Palin's already-discussed 2008 interview with Katie Couric effectively showcase this. The first is a clip of Palin discussing education. This was a moment in the interview in which Palin stayed largely "on-issue" and answered the question succinctly. It has only several thousand views. The second clip is of Palin on Foreign Policy. This is the now-infamous section of the interview in which Palin's "I know about Russia because I can see it from my back yard" rhetoric reared its ugly head. These moments later became known as a turning point in the 2008 Presidential campaign. Perhaps not surprisingly, this clip has more than 4.6 million views.⁹²

Why Should We Care?

Since awareness or interest in this issue is likely to be low among the general voter base, projects like this one, but perhaps more importantly, *all* the work of a great many special interest groups is particularly important. Americans *should* care. They should care that 50% of their

⁹⁰ Editorial Board, "The Worst Voter Turnout in 72 Years"

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Sarah Palin, "Palin on Foreign Policy" Interviewed by Katie Couric. *CBS Evening News*, September 25, 2008, late edition, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZVh_u5RyiU. (Accessed December 28, 2015)

population is not fairly represented. They *should* care that because of an unfair and societally produced media bias, a great many intelligent, qualified individuals are opting out of public service.

There is also a shared sentiment among many related projects and studies that women have the potential to be more effective leaders. Project Parity, She Should Run, The National Democratic Institute (a non-partisan group) and scholars at Psychology Today, among others agree that women possess certain characteristics that render them more effective at decision-making and collaborating.⁹³⁹⁴ These groups describe female leaders as excelling at consensus building, ethical decision-making, transformational leadership, and as being motivated by policy goals, rather than power or prestige.⁹⁵ These monikers are not included herein to set women above men in some battle of the sexes. Instead, the author includes this point to promote the idea that the addition of more women to government would be positive and to abolish any thought that women are ineffective as leaders. In fact, according to Project Parity, women are 31% more effective at advancing legislation and congresswomen in particular deliver on average, \$49 million more in federal programs per year to their home districts than their male counterparts.⁹⁶

Not in a Vacuum

The author would be remiss if she didn't acknowledge that male political figures are sometimes subjected to sexist media coverage. They are attacked for their appearance, their personas and their personal lives. While the frequency of this sort of coverage is much higher for

⁹³ Riggio, Ronald, "Why We Need More Women Leaders," *Psychology Today*, November 1, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201311/why-we-need-more-women-leaders>. (Accessed December 28, 2015)

⁹⁴ Political Parity, "Why Women," (n.d.)

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

their female counterparts, it happens to men as well. Though objectively different than those placed on women, men face certain expectations that have been grown and nurtured by American society. These expectations are two sides of the same gender roles coin. Examples of this type of coverage abound in the 2016 Presidential Election. One clear example is now-pop-culture-phenomenon of Donald Trump's hair. Though fascination and coverage of this aspect of Trump's appearance began before the election, the volume of coverage that references his hair has increased almost exponentially. It has become, particularly in liberal media, part of a created Donald Trump character that is both more than a little crazy and supremely pompous.

Jeb Bush is another candidate whose non-policy qualities receive a lot of attention. A great deal of Bush's coverage frames him as a failing chapter of a political dynasty. Not only do comparisons of him to his father and brother run rampant, with little mention of *his* specific policies, a great deal of coverage also attacks his personality. Bush, who was an early favorite in the Republican race, has been characterized as a boring establishment figure. This has culminated in headlines like "Bush Campaign Reportedly Prepares Normal, Boring Attack Ads."⁹⁷ Bush, like Trump, now has a "character, a media facsimile. Recently, the media heavily covered a campaign event with low attendance and somewhat gleefully described that Bush had to ask for applause at one point.⁹⁸

This coverage alters the way that people think about these candidates. It becomes part of that individual's brand and the fabric of their public persona. As in the case of female political figures, this type of coverage is symptomatic of an American, or perhaps, a human inclination to focus on appearance and other superficial elements. This inclination creates similar challenges

⁹⁷ Kilgore, Ed, "Bush Campaigns Reportedly Prepares, Normal Boring Attack Ads-*Politico* Calls Them 'Scorched Earth'," *New York Magazine*, February 10, 2016, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/02/politico-calls-boring-bush-ads-scorched-earth.html>. (Accessed February 18, 2016)

⁹⁸ Associated Press, "Jeb Bush asks N.H. audience to clap for him," *Associated Press*, February 04, 2016. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2016/02/03/jeb-bush-asks-audience-clap-for-him/ucibcFEHvazbbYbIWNaAel/story.html>. (Accessed February 18, 2016)

for male political figures as it does for women, and makes it considerably more difficult for that person to reach their audience with message.

The author does not contend that male political figures never endure biased media coverage. She does, however, contend that the negative impact of sexist media coverage is more significant for female political figures writ large. Firstly, there isn't any evidence to show that a media focus on appearance has any impact on male political figure's poll numbers, whereas appearance media mentions, be they positive, negative, or neutral, cause a female political figure's numbers to drop.

The second difference is that America has never existed without almost ubiquitous male leadership. Male political figures are commonplace; their position in leadership is solid. No one has ever contested their place in government. The other side of that coin is that historically, women have existed primarily outside leadership positions and inside the domestic space. Men don't face scrutiny for leaving the home and family to pursue their leadership goals, women do. There is no longstanding social pressure to keep men from running for office. Media may pry into the private lives of male political figures, it may undeservedly criticize their appearance, but it doesn't act as a deterrent to entering politics. It does for women.

Chapter Three: From the Mouths of Babes: What the Experts Are Saying

The author conducted primary research in the form of interviews to substantiate her arguments and recommendations. The interview subjects fell into one of two categories. Each was a communicator, a strategist/manager, or a politician. Conversations with campaign strategists served to make sense of the strategic thinking that goes on behind closed doors for female political figures. Talking to these women allowed the author to reconcile information

gleaned from written sources about this media discrepancy with the reality that not only these figures face, but that their advisers must contend with the achieve any campaign or legislative goals. When the author interviewed actual female politicians, the aim was to understand, on a personal level, how the media bias affects those elected/potential officials. It is easy, considering the large amount of information and scholarly work available on this subject, to forget that its effects are felt by real people who, for better or worse, entered the political arena with hopes and goals. By interviewing women who had felt the pressures of media bias, the author was able to understand the way theory can meet practice.

These interviews yielded several results. They produced fascinating and inspiring conversations, but also a greater understanding, on the author's behalf, of how a trained communicator might guide a female political figure to mitigate the incidence and effects of media bias, and perhaps even to inspire a shift in thinking within the media and in society itself. Previous chapters have discussed media bias at the federal or state levels. These incidences are certainly the most obvious and have been written about most frequently, but as the author intimated earlier, this bias is ubiquitous. The results of this project's interviews proved this to be true. Local leaders like councilwomen or board members experience it just like Presidential candidates do. The differences between those experiences are just a matter of scale. All interview subjects work on the state level or lower, but they have nevertheless all been forced to deal with the gap in coverage between male and female political figures.

The author interviewed three communicators⁹⁹: Lindsay Bubar, principal at Bubar Consulting and Southern California Program Director for EMERGE California¹⁰⁰, Mary Hughes,

⁹⁹ See Appendix A for full communicator interview subject biographies.

¹⁰⁰ Emerge California is an organization that encourages and trains Democratic women to run for office. They do this through a four-month training program during which the participant receives tools and training they need to equip themselves for office. See www.emergeca.org/about for more information.

Founder and Principal at Close the Gap¹⁰¹, and Rachel Michelin, Executive Director and CEO at California Women Lead.¹⁰² Two politicians were interviewed, both of whom have served in the Los Angeles area during their time in office.¹⁰³ The author spoke to Cindy Montañez, former Assemblywoman from California's 29th Assembly District, and to Wendy Greuel, former Los Angeles City Controller.

Each subject was asked several questions, all pertaining to the state of media coverage that female political figures face.¹⁰⁴ In this chapter, the author will report select findings of those interviews, which serve to further substantiate the importance of understanding and combatting the media bias against female political candidates. While secondary research is extremely helpful in establishing a baseline to characterize the issue, it is equally as valuable to explore the way people in the field, who contend with it daily, understand it.

Cultural Barriers

Before the author delved too deeply into the specifics of media bias with the interviewees, she first wanted to understand their views of the cultural barriers involved. As has been previously explained, sexism is the root cause of this media bias. More detailed questions would help to characterize the way that these female political figures deal with the gap in coverage, but the author wanted to know by what the experts thought the problem was caused. The following are key responses that help to explain the phenomenon:

¹⁰¹ Close the Gap is a California campaign to recruit progressive women to run for office. This organization works with others civic and political organization, public school advocates, and others to find and run talented women to office. Please see www.closesthegapca.org/about-us/ for more information.

¹⁰² California Women Lead is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that provides leadership and campaign trainings, networking opportunities and policy discussion forums for women interested in or who hold elected and appointed offices. Its mission is to encourage and support women to seek election in a public office. Please see www.cawomenlead.org for more information.

¹⁰³ See Appendix B for full politician interview subject biographies.

¹⁰⁴ See Appendix C for a full list of interview questions.

Cindy Montañez:

You start off with the bias toward—or just feeling for years and years, generations and generations, that politics have been male dominated [...] There's a national tendency [to say] “men are going to know more about jobs and the economy than women”. I don't think people always do it intentionally. We're so used to seeing 100% of your [representatives] being men, no one thinks about it. If 100% are women, people start thinking “what's different?! There's more women up there!” So a lot of that has to do with initial bias we all come in with, where we're in a society where women still are not given the same amount of airtime and attention, especially in politics, as men are. Again it comes from cultural ideals that exist about what women elected officials focus on and what male elected officials focus on. That change is not going to come until we start seeing women politicians as politicians and not women politicians as women. When I am an elected official, I'm an elected official. I'm a policy maker. I'm a woman, but don't just talk about my personal life and women's issues.¹⁰⁵

Rachel Michelin:

I think that one of the key barriers is other women. I think women in the media are harder on other women in politics than the men. And that's true even when you're talking about running. [...] I think that part of it is that as women we play by the rules of politics that were created by men and I think that until we learn as women to change the rules and stand up for each other in terms of how they're covered, [nothing will change].¹⁰⁶

Mary Hughes:

What I know from my research is that, women are treated differently [by the press]. Male and female reporters treat women differently, because we're all socialized and we grow up with different perceptions of what it means to be male and female and the strengths and weaknesses of those gender assignments. It's embedded in us. Now, having said that, some reporters are more aware of having those kinds of embedded biases and they work hard to treat candidates similarly.¹⁰⁷

Where the Media Meets Politics When Politicians are Women

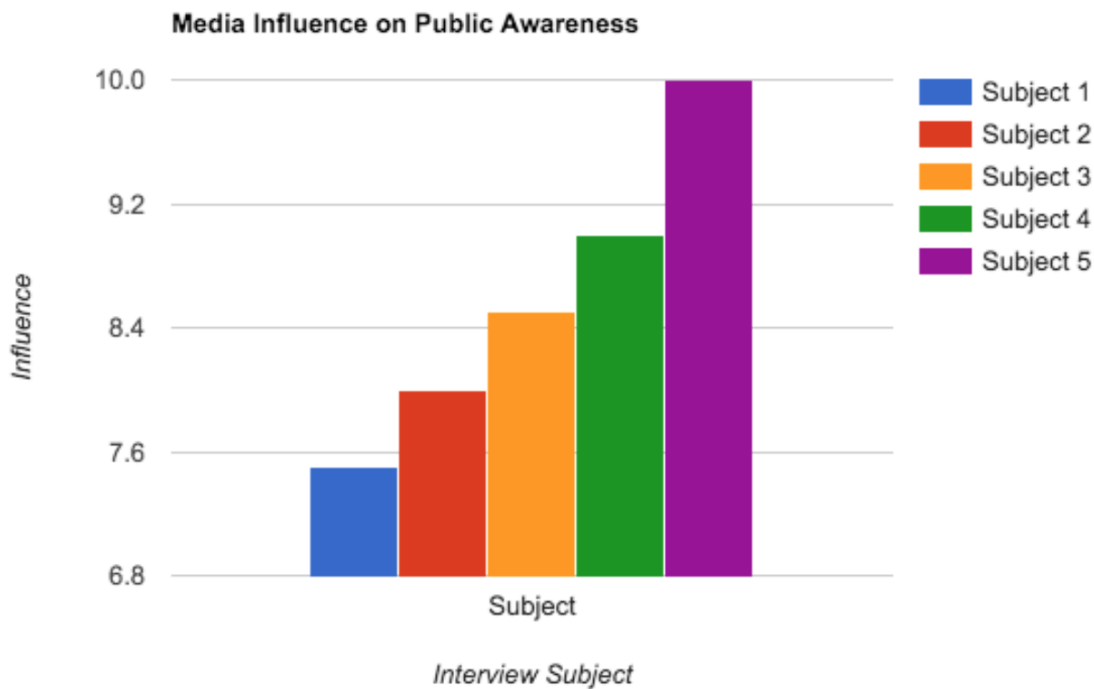
Interview subjects were asked to rate how strongly media influences public awareness of political issues on a scale of 1-10. An answer of “1” would have indicated that it doesn't affect

¹⁰⁵ Montañez, Cindy, phone conversation with author, November 12, 2015

¹⁰⁶ Michelin, Rachel, phone conversation with author, November 9, 2015

¹⁰⁷ Hughes, Mary, phone conversation with author, December 7, 2015

campaign or career at all, whereas a “10” would have indicated that the media was the sole influencer of public knowledge. It is difficult to get quantitative data on this entire issue, so by asking this, the author was able to get a sense of how strongly this issue affected the reality of politics. Responses varied, depending on which level of government the subject referred to, but the lowest score given was a 7.5 (see figure 3.1).



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Figure 3.1 Graphic rendering of interviewee responses.

Every single interviewee indicated the extreme seriousness of this issue. Subjects were also asked: “what do you perceive to be the media’s relationship to female candidates and politicians?” Responses varied slightly, but overall, again, these women indicated that female candidates and figures have a much, much more difficult with the press than male candidates do.

¹⁰⁸ This graphic was generated by the author to visually display the results of question #1 on both communicator and politician interview guides. When the subject gave a range (ex. 7 or 8), the author took the mean of the two answers given to plot the data.

Some subject shared personal anecdotes, while others discussed general themes and tropes they have encountered over and over again in their careers. The following are some of the most impactful responses that the author received:

Mary Hughes remarked that,

What I know from my research is that, women are treated differently [by the press]. Male and female reporters treat women differently, because we're all socialized and we grow up with different perceptions of what it means to be male and female and the strengths and weaknesses of those gender assignments. It's embedded in us. Now, having said that, some reporters are more aware of having those kinds of embedded biases and they work hard to treat candidates similarly.¹⁰⁹

Lindsay Bubar shared that,

You know, I would say that on the face of it, it seems, if you're not plugged into the challenges, I'm not sure you'd notice the tensions in the relationship, and I think that's the dangerous part. When I look at the relationship between media and candidates, a lot of it *is* subtle, which is generally what exists in society with sexism. The subtle things that are happening that are the most dangerous and the most pervasive. If you were to ask someone who isn't a woman, who doesn't have to go through it, [he] might not even realize it. So I guess what I would say is that for candidates and politicians it's very obvious because they go through it and experience it and [the relationship] is not very trusting [...].

It means something when a woman's tone of voice is called "shrew." People reading that might not see it, but it impacts how they perceive a candidate. You never hear men described that way. It's subtle and nuanced. It's really important to talk about. [An example is] the last the Mayor's race. When [the LA Times would run photos of Eric Garcetti it was always a photo of him that made him look sweet and innocent and like a leader and they would run photos of Wendy [Greuel] where her mouth was half open and she looked really angry and tired and those images next to each other really impacted people. But unless you know what you're looking for, no one would point that out as a way that the media was being sexist during the race.¹¹⁰

Cindy Montañez, a politician herself, noted,

When it comes to women politicians and candidates, I have always felt that [the press doesn't] do a fair job in interviewing women candidates and elected officials. It depends on the topics[.] There are certain topics the press will consider [women's

¹⁰⁹ Hughes, Mary, phone conversation with author, December 7, 2015.

¹¹⁰ Bubar, Lindsay, phone conversation with author, November 19, 2015

issues] and therefore will interview a woman [about] choice, or reproductive rights. When it comes to issues of say foreign policy or the economy, which are some of the biggest issues that people care about—particularly jobs and the economy, it’s rare that you find a woman elected official or woman candidate being asked questions. I think that the press, definitely—though it has improved—takes part in the perpetuation of sexual stereotypes.¹¹¹

Wendy Greuel noted that,

The media is often cautious but their bias does show. And it’s interesting and I see it on both men and women. Women cover harder on other women. And then [there] are other women who will see when you challenge them about much issue knowledge than their male counterparts [...] there are people who are trying to keep media balanced. But sometimes it’s the little things that come into it, the kind of words that they use, the headlines that they use and it’s particularly difficult as a candidate or an elected official to be tough or to be strong because if you’re not strong you’re weak and women are weak...¹¹²

These interviews served to highlight the very present, obvious discrepancies in media coverage for female candidates. Both communicators and politicians alike mirrored the key themes that characterize the media’s relationship with female candidates. Among these are notes about the focus on the candidate or figure’s gender rather than on their ability to lead as an independent quality, the gendered language that is used to cover female candidates, and the larger societal implications of the problem.

Characterizing Challenges Faced by Female Political Figures

Understanding the general tenor of the relationship between media and female political candidates is important, but it is by no means enough. As indicated in Chapters 1 & 2, there are specific challenges that female political figures face when it comes to media bias. These include things like the “hair, hemlines, and husbands” effect, as well as the constant questioning of their credibility as leaders. The author, of course, found extensive study on this in secondary sources,

¹¹¹ Montañez, Cindy, phone conversation with author, November 12, 2015

¹¹² Greuel, Wendy, phone conversation with author, December 11, 2015

but that interview subjects confirmed those findings with very particular thoughts on the appearance and personal life fixation of the media. The following statements are made by interview subjects on these themes, based on their own experience in the field.

On Appearance

Cindy Montañez stated,

So number one, we all know that the minute we are shown on camera, [there will be an] automatic [...] focus on your appearance and attire. And there will be, no doubt about it, comments at some point in your political career—likely early on—about how you dress. How you appear. How long is your hair? What’s your makeup like? It’s very much about dress and attire rather than the candidate, the platforms and the attitudes. When that happens, [media is] impacting that campaign.¹¹³

On Personal Life

Lindsay Bubar noted that

[Women are] more harshly criticized in terms of family makeup: “are you married?” “Are you not married?” “do you have children?” “If you have children, how are planning on being in an elected office?” “If you don’t have children and you’re married, why don’t you have children?” That whole thing, in terms of family makeup and relationships. It’s really challenging for women.¹¹⁴

Cindy Montañez also commented on this topic, saying

There’s also this whole thing of are we married, are we single? If we have families, what kind of mothers are we? Are we able to handle our roles, both as an elected official and our role as—what’s supposed to be our role as “good mothers”? [That] doesn’t always happen for male candidates, and I know that with men, their appearance and their attire and their family and their personality isn’t [...] a part of how the press evaluates male candidates, but it’s one of the things that we, as women, [are] going [...] encounter. We’re going to get looked at before we’re asked questions on foreign policy or health care reform or some of these other more pertinent issues.¹¹⁵

Additionally, Rachel Michelin, a California political consultant shared that

¹¹³ Montañez, 2015

¹¹⁴ Bubar, 2015

¹¹⁵ Montañez, 2015

I think other challenges that the media tends [...] to focus on more personal issues with women candidates than with male candidates. They'll pull in things about their families, how they're balancing things that they may not do to a male candidate. And I think they're trying to get women candidates to screw up a little bit. So I think those are the things they face. Women tend to be a lot more concerned how it's going to affect their family and so I think that women may not be as open as some of the male candidates and elected.¹¹⁶

On Credibility as a Leader

Lindsay Bubar got at the issue of qualification of female political figures, saying

Obviously we talked about the appearance part but also what's a "qualified candidate" is very different for women than it is for men, so there's this qualification threshold you have to overcome in order to succeed, where men have far less experience rarely gets questioned about whether or not they're qualified candidates. Women have to prove that they're qualified. You have to be a really top tier candidate in order to be qualified candidate if you're a woman.¹¹⁷

Rachel Michelin saw another pattern in media that was particularly disturbing and said that,

I do think you see—if you're talking about candidacy—particularly if you have two women running against each other, the media tries to make, you know, cat fights or that kind of thing. As opposed to just focusing on them as candidates and on what they will bring to the table if they are elected [sic].¹¹⁸

Mary Hughes invoked an excellent source of information on this subject as well as offering an authoritative analysis on the problem, when she said this:

The challenge for a woman is to convey the proper combination of strength and warmth. The Barbara Lee Family Foundation has researched this topic and one of things they have brought to light is very important¹¹⁹. Voters will vote for a man they do not like, but that they believe to be qualified. They have a much tougher time, voting for a woman they do not like who they believe is qualified. And many won't.

¹¹⁶ Michelin, Rachel, phone conversation with author, November 9, 2015

¹¹⁷ Bubar, 2015

¹¹⁸ Michelin, 2015

¹¹⁹ Barbara Lee Family Foundation, "Women in Politics," Barbara Lee Family Foundation, (n.d), <http://www.barbaraleefoundation.org/our-programs-partnerships/women-in-politics>. (Accessed December 30, 2015)

So when you talk about the media the question is of presenting yourself as both an authoritative voice, decisive, clear thinking, in command and not losing the warmth that is a lot of people would automatically ascribe to a woman. I think that that is a huge challenge in how you present yourself... Those are challenges. Is it a different challenge for a woman? It is, because her likability is critical to a voter choosing her, a man's is not.¹²⁰

What Needs to Change? Why Should We Care?

The author believes it's pertinent to take a moment and describe to the reader the impact of conducting these interviews. The collective experience and expertise of these communicators and political figures was not only inspiring from the perspective of an academic, but also from that of a young woman with a significant passion for and interest in politics. The most substantive, important moments of these interviews came when experts were asked to talk about the implications of this media bias against female political figures. Though their answers largely mirrored much of the secondary research found in Chapter Two, there was a real urgency to this topic for them.

Wendy Greuel said candidly, "It seems criminal to me that [there is] only one woman on the city council today out of [...] 16 elected officials. We've gone backwards."¹²¹ These women live the media bias every day and it is as frustrating to them as it is challenging. The interviewees spoke with urgency about why the status quo cannot be allowed to continue. They "got real" and said that at the end of the day, the most effective solution for this problem would be simply, to elect more women. Here are some of their thoughts on this matter:

Lindsay Bubar said

The challenge is that viewers and media, we don't view women as leaders. And what shifts that is having more women in leadership roles. And so despite the deficit in the media, if we can overcome that, and I think we can at the local level—media doesn't

¹²⁰ Hughes, 2015

¹²¹ Greuel, 2015

cover local or legislative as much unless it's "the race of the state. If we can focus at the local level, by building the pipeline and working our way up, and electing more women and it becomes more commonplace to elect women, I think that will shift media coverage. You no longer have to prove that you're qualified or why you're a leader. The focus shifts because it is more commonplace."¹²²

Cindy Montañez's statements were aligned with Bubar's. She said that

The participation in women in politics is a key and essential part [...] of policy and change. Unless the press and we as women become much more assertive in getting ourselves engaged and getting covered by the press, a whole 50% of the population will not be heard. So the thing that we have to do—and I think it goes back to women as elected officials in our offices and women running for offices is that we have to be much more assertive, we have to be much more aggressive about going out and talking to the press.¹²³

Finally, Rachel Michelin noted an important truth about one of women's greatest challenges in maintaining their poise and persona in the media. She says

I think it's going to take women standing up for other women [especially] if they're from different parties. Standing up and saying, you can't attack women on a personal level anymore. That shouldn't just be acceptable behavior in politics. That's why we're seeing fewer and fewer women running in—particularly in California—because of this negativity in the media. There are fewer women candidates. Women have to say, "I don't have to agree with this woman, but there still should be a minimal level or standard when it comes to what you're going to cover when it comes to a political campaign"¹²⁴.

Listening and Really Hearing

As the author listened to these expert women discuss their chosen fields and the ways in which their gender impacts the work, she began to see patterns. First of all, much of what these subjects were saying mirrored what she found in secondary research. These interviews were invaluable, however, as they added a personal edge and a sense of reality to all the theoretically challenging parts of being a female political figure. What's more, these subjects were able to

¹²² Bubar, 2015

¹²³ Montañez, 2015

¹²⁴ Michelin, 2015

share their thoughts, sharpened from years in the professional space, on how this issue might begin to be resolved, and the role that communicators and campaign strategists can play in making that happen.

The author will incorporate these particular details into her own recommendations in the next chapter. Absent a sudden and complete end to sexism in the United States, it is strategies like the ones to come that will help to mitigate the negative effects of imbalanced media coverage of female political figures.

Chapter Four: I'd Rather Rescue Myself

Hillary Clinton's run for president in 2008 was a glaring example of how devastating this issue, combined with a disorganized communications strategy, can be. The double bind of being female in politics was at play in a very significant manner throughout the duration of Clinton's campaign. If then-senator Clinton showed any emotion during campaign events, she was crucified by the media for being "too soft." If she took the opposite approach and maintained an air of seriousness and tenacity, she was labeled a "bitch" or said to be mannish.¹²⁵ These pressures, exerted upon Clinton and her team, caused a mishandling of communication strategy. Clinton's public appearances flip-flopped between the two seemingly distinct sides of her personality, or perhaps more accurately, her persona. In the end, this uncertain strategy caused damage to the Clinton brand that later proved, after a difficult primary, to be devastating.¹²⁶

In 2007, no one would have expected a junior senator from Illinois to join the race and shake things up the way that Barack Obama did. His campaign and communications were well formed and impactful. The author would argue, however, that despite the unprecedented

¹²⁵ Kornblutt, *Notes from the Cracked Ceiling*, 57-88

¹²⁶ Ibid.

challenges of Obama's racial background, he did not face the sheer wall of resistance from the media that Clinton did, which was based significantly around her gender. Add to that, a faulty communications strategy, and Hillary Clinton's campaign ended. She lost, in large part due to a failure on behalf of staff and she herself, to understand and adjust communication strategy to take on gender bias in media.

Far be it from the author, a young, largely inexperienced practitioner of public relations to judge the actions of seasoned campaign managers and communications professionals. It does seem, however, that a great many of the problems caused by media bias can be mitigated with several public relations best practices. Mary Hughes, a longtime political advisor to female politicians, says that "the media is a representation of the culture, writ large."¹²⁷ Hughes is right. Asking or expecting the media to cover female political figures more fairly is unrealistic. As long as society fosters sexist manners of thinking, demand for sexist coverage will persist. Rather than pleading with media to cover a candidate or political figure fairly, communicators and female political figures alike can make decisions regarding their messaging and communications strategy that can help.

The preceding chapters of the project have been designed and written with the goal of arming its readers with the historical precedence and implications of, and expert opinions on this issue. This final chapter will explain how best practices in public relations, a larger field that contains both media relations and political communications, might serve as a useful tool for female political figures and their advisers against inherent media bias.

¹²⁷ Hughes, 2015

Public Relations as it Relates to Media and Political Campaigns

According to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), public relations should be defined as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.”¹²⁸ While this definition paints a general picture of the field, the author would, for the purposes of this project, amend that definition to read “a strategic communications process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations, *individuals*, or brands and their publics.” This definition accounts for the many practitioners who are responsible for nurturing an individual or a brand’s relations with the many stakeholder groups they might have. Public relations is about more than strictly media relations and publicity work, but it seems, in a lot of cases, particularly in the political arena, those tried-and-true strategies are essential. But, while media relations are crucial, that practice isn’t the only way to reach audiences and hone a brand.

In the case of this chapter, the political figure is the individual with whom communicators are concerned. The success of and ultimate effectiveness of the political figure depends on the propagation and maintenance of a positive relationship with stakeholders. Depending on the level of government in which that figure operates, stakeholders could be constituents, resident voters or voters in a federal election. The relationship between political figure and constituent cannot exist without effective communication strategy on the part of the politician and her team.

A female political figure’s communication strategy should reflect this shift and the multi-faceted array of options available to a smart and savvy PR practitioner. This will ensure that the candidate is as up-to-date in her outreach as she is in her platform or legislation. This chapter

¹²⁸ Public Relations Society of America, “About Public Relations,” PRSA, (n.d.), <https://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/PublicRelationsDefined/#.VovrC9-rRE4>. (Accessed January 2, 2016)

will suggest ways in which female political candidates or figures can overcome the inherent gender bias in the media. While no perfect solution exists, save for society's entry into the 21st century, these may help female political figures to mitigate the harmful effects of political media bias. These recommendations and best practices will be based on information provided by subject area experts in the field and on the author's own training and education in the public relations arena.

While there are very few hard and fast rules this area, there are certainly "do's and don'ts" that have become abundantly clear through the test of time and through the author's research. The following recommendations are presented as Areas of Attention, under which a list of do's, don'ts, and evidence to support will be included.

Area of Attention #1: Choosing Outlets Wisely

Media today exists on multiple platforms, through multiple mediums and is owned, earned, or paid for by just about everyone. This media landscape is full of opportunities for coverage, but is also very complex and deserving of some careful strategic decision-making on the part of political figures and their communications teams. Political communications, unlike other industry sectors still use traditional broadcast and print as their primary mode of media. It isn't a secret that some outlets, particularly traditional publications, carry a significant political bias. For example, Fox News and its affiliates are known to lean right-wing conservative, while MSNBC has a reputation for its left-leaning, liberal angle.¹²⁹ It has regularly been suggested that

¹²⁹Levendusky, Matt, "Are Fox and MSNBC polarizing America?" *The Washington Post: Monkey Cage*, February 3, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/02/03/are-fox-and-msnbc-polarizing-america/>. (Accessed January 3, 2016)

these outlets are partially responsible for the political polarization that has taken place in the past 20 years or so.¹³⁰

The nature of news is such that political figures can't always control who covers them and how. That is, in fact, one of the central issues for female political figures in confronting media bias. Communication strategists can, however, make smart choices about who they offer stories too, or where they decide to break stories. The author wanted to know more about types of media and their impact on female political figures. Essentially, in a saturated media landscape, are there outlets that tend to treat female political figures more fairly, or that tend to at least focus on their issues or legislation, rather than non-essential information about appearance and family dynamics. The insights that these experts shared were fascinating and showed the creativity that communicators and political figures use to get the kind of coverage that helps rather than hurts. Their thoughts greatly influence the following best practices:

Do: Reach Out to and Work with Tradigital News Sources (i.e. blogs, online publications)

Unlike traditional broadcast and print publications, online sources aren't limited by space and advertising constrictions. These tradigital sources also tend to be non-partisan, or are at least plentiful enough to provide strategists with ample choices for coverage. The Internet is also the home of a great deal of discussion on gender, particularly on sexism toward women. There is awareness in that space that doesn't exist in more publications of the negative impact of gender bias. Rachel Michelin notes that

The most egalitarian are young bloggers, associated with places like Politico or Daily Beast. These places have lots of good women writing a particular beats who are contributors to outlets like WSJ, Inc., or Forbes and they're writing about women leaders or women in power. They are generally possessing of an awareness that you

¹³⁰ Ibid.

don't find at the upper echelon of a corporate, established media outlet. That's not always true, but generally, it tends to be true.¹³¹

This is a best practice at any level of government. The only difference would be the particular outlet. For example, a candidate for Federal office, such as president or a seat in Congress, might reach out to Katie Glueck at Politico, or Betsy Woodruff at the Daily Beast. If a female state senator in California has a particular piece of new legislation she wants to discuss, she can reach out to Jack Kavanaugh at Rough & Tumble, a well-read blog that focuses on California politics.¹³²

Michelin also suggests something interesting. Male reporters are 100% capable of writing without gender bias, but nevertheless, often a woman's best chance for coverage that focuses on her as a candidate or politician may lie with a female reporter.

Don't: Sacrifice Content for Coverage

As previously stated, traditional publications have a large audience when it comes to the political arena. Though tradigital sources are growing in popularity, the general public, particularly generations like Baby Boomers, still seeks out specific traditional means of consuming political news.¹³³ While it is tempting to reach out to well read, well watched outlets, it's important to keep in mind that larger outlets tend to get that readership because of the sensational nature of the articles. Ostensibly, the reason for this sensationalism is the ratings game. People are consuming less and less from traditional outlets, so it is imperative for reporters at those outlets to report news that people will read. Rachel Michelin comments, "as you get higher up in the food chain, [outlets are] trying to make more money and they're trying

¹³¹ Michelin, 2015

¹³² Jack Kavanaugh, *Rough & Tumble*, <http://www.rumble.com/mabout.html> (Accessed January 3, 2016)

¹³³ Mitchell, Amy, et al., "Millennials and Political News" *Pew Research Center: Journalism and Media*, June 1, 2015, <http://www.journalism.org/2015/06/01/millennials-political-news/> (Accessed January 3, 2016)

to be a little more sensationalized, which can be a little harder [for candidates].”¹³⁴ Often this sensational coverage is the very same biased coverage that becomes a challenge for female political figures.

Michelin further notes that

The higher up the food chain—the more corporate the outlet—like classic network television—the greater the challenge. These are highly competitive outlets, with lots of men at the top. For most broadcast news, ratings are based on controversy, resulting in aggressive reporters [...] there tends to be, at more competitive places, more traditional views and more traditional views rewarded. And I’m mindful of that.”¹³⁵

All political communicators should be mindful of that, as should the political figures for whom they work. Despite the large reader/viewer numbers of traditional publications, the author recommends that female political figures not sacrifice the content for their coverage, ideally thought-driven pieces about legislation or about a particular issue platform, for coverage that is read by the masses. This seems a little counterintuitive, to be sure. Isn’t the best way to gain awareness of a political figure to present them to the largest group of voters, readers, or citizens? The reality is this: women have barriers to the public seeing them as legitimate leaders, often based on news coverage that focuses on the personal, rather than the political. Insofar as it is within their control, they should feed stories to and cooperate with media that is going to cover their policy, not their personal life.

Area of Attention #2: Establishing Relationships with Key Stakeholders

This area of attention is a standard practice of public relations. Over the course of his or her career, a public relations practitioner will create relationships with reporters and other media

¹³⁴ Michelin, 2015

¹³⁵ Ibid.

individuals. Those are the first ports of call when a client has a story to tell or news to share. These relationships are like any others; they require not only a foundation, but also maintenance.

In the case of female political figures, this rule can apply to not only media individuals, but also other key individuals in the communities or populous in which that politician operates. Since media and voters are so much harder on women in the field, it pays off for female politicians to put in extra time developing relationships with key stakeholders.

Do: Build a Personal Relationship With Reporters at Key Outlets

This is an extension of making smart publication choices. Even at a publication or broadcast outlet that tends to treat female political figures fairly, further work can be done to ensure that coverage. A communicator can build relationships with reporters that can help achieve that goal. Essentially, the crux of this recommendation is that if reporters see that female politician as a person, and get to know her as a person, they will use more tact and fairness when writing about them. Rachel Michelin says, “The more they know you as a person and not just as a candidate, [the] better representation in the media [you will receive].”¹³⁶

Cindy Montañez spoke on this subject during her interview. She noted that

I did appreciate that the advisors would say, ‘if you’re going to talk to this reporter, whether it be for print or TV, it would be smart to learn the bias of that particular reporter or network’. In the same way that we study our policy issues, we should study the press. If you’re going to interview, it’s important for us to understand the media better.¹³⁷

Montañez makes an excellent point here. The best way to build positive relationships with a reporter or outlet is to understand them and to be able, as much as possible, to give them a story

¹³⁶ Michelin, 2015

¹³⁷ Montañez, 2015

that works with the particular requirements of their format. The continued exercise of goodwill toward the media cannot be discounted. It is vitally important to achieve optimum coverage.

Do: Become an Expert

This is another standard practice of public relations practitioners. The leadership qualifications of female political figures are constantly questioned. A solution for this is to position that politician as an expert in a given topic. What better way to control the way a woman appears in political coverage than to have reporters come to her as an issue/topic expert? Rachel Michelin, a political strategist uses this strategy with her candidates. She describes the iteration of this process when working with local office candidates:

I tell [candidates] if they are even considering running for office [...] to become a go-to person. They [should] also [attend] meetings, [read] what's in the local paper. For Facebook, [they should post] things that your community is going to be interested in. [Example post:] "here was a community forum about school financing. And here are some of the takeaways I took from this community meeting". [Voters will say], "Oh, she's an expert. She's going to these things. She's communicating with people."¹³⁸

Don't: Wait to Develop Relationships Until There is News to Report

Michelin also says, "I think it's [about] investing the time to develop those relationships with people in the media or start getting engaged in politics, if you're running for school board or city council and choosing to continue those relationships if you're rising up the political ladder."

¹³⁹ Michelin's point is a good one. Proactivity is key to ensuring that a female politician is covered in a way that highlights her policy and her issues, rather than her personality. If you give a story to a reporter, they don't need to do the work to find one and you control the narrative.

These relationships with media personalities and with other stakeholders are only useful if they

¹³⁸ Michelin, 2015

¹³⁹ Ibid.

are formed before any big stories or announcements are made. Investing the time early provides security for later.

Area of Attention #3: Controlling the Narrative (Being the Brand)

This is perhaps the biggest challenge for public relations practitioners and is a main tenet of the practice of branding. For any given organization, company, or group, the brand is the most valuable asset.¹⁴⁰ In a 2011 article, Forbes describes branding thus: “Put simply, your ‘brand’ is what your prospect thinks of when he or she hears your brand name. It’s everything the public thinks it knows about your name brand offering, both factual (e.g. It comes in a robin’s-egg-blue box), and emotional (e.g. It’s romantic). Your brand name exists objectively; people can see it. It’s fixed. But your brand exists only in someone’s mind.”¹⁴¹ Political communicators can, and should, consider their candidate or politician in the same way. Every component of the political figure’s policy, leadership, or public appearances combine to create her brand and by the extension, the way in which the public views her.

Rachel Michelin says that when female political figures speak out, “[they’re] creating [their] personal brand. [They] need to be in charge of that. [They] dictate the message, don’t let people dictate the message for [them].”¹⁴² A brand built on credibility and legitimacy can go a long way in overcoming media bias for a female political figure. With this in mind, it is absolutely crucial that a political figure be in charge of her narrative. This is an essential part of maintaining her personal brand.

¹⁴⁰Wolfe, Jennifer, “Protect Your Brand. It’s Your Most Valuable Asset,” *Business Week*, December 30, 2010, http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/tips/archives/2010/12/protect_your_brand_its_your_most_valuable_asset.html. (Accessed January 4, 2016)

¹⁴¹McLaughlin, Jerry, “What is a Brand, Anyway?” *Forbes: Entrepreneurs*, December 21, 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jerrymclaughlin/2011/12/21/what-is-a-brand-anyway/>. (Accessed January 4, 2016)

¹⁴²Michelin, 2015

Do: Use the Channels That are Available

In today's media landscape, there are so many tools that can help female political figures, and anyone else who feels inclined, to tell their stories. If one such woman isn't getting the coverage she wants in traditional media, it is her prerogative — indeed it is savvy storytelling — to use social channels to spread her message. This is a key part of controlling message. The more information a politician makes available through her own media, the more is available to the press and to the public. All of that information has of course, been vetted by the politician herself and by her team. Rachel Michelin says, “ I think women have to [...] put the time in to control their own message. And that is using the power of social media, it's becoming an expert in social media, taking classes and also not getting sucked [into] the comments section, on Facebook or Nextdoor.”¹⁴³¹⁴⁴

New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand effectively uses her social channels, particularly her Facebook page.¹⁴⁵ On it, she continuously shares information and posts about her many legislative goals and about how interested parties can find more information about what she is working on. She, or perhaps more accurately, her staff, posts about once a day. Posts range from the solicitation of public thought on a topic, which is risky, but shows her to be open to discussion, to laymen explanations of dense bills. One relatively brief glance shows a visitor to the page a lot about Gillibrand's political persona and about her character as well.

This best practice can be overwhelming, particularly for women 35+, who did not grow up, as the Millennial generation did, knowing how to use social media. Mary Hughes says, “You

¹⁴³ Nextdoor is lesser-known social media platform that allows neighborhoods and communities to have a shared discussion/communication space. For more, see www.nextdoor.com

¹⁴⁴ Michelin, 2015

¹⁴⁵ Kirsten Gillibrand, “Kirsten Gillibrand,” *Facebook*, (n.d.), <https://www.facebook.com/KirstenGillibrand/?fref=ts>. (Accessed January 4, 2016)

[post] on your Facebook page and people respond to it. [...] I think it's also generational. For some women, the complexities of online delivery and the multifaceted ways you can connect, Instagram with Pinterest and integrate those into your own photo album on your website, is challenging. On big campaigns, it is fine. You can hire someone, but on smaller campaign, when people are more do-it-yourself or are running smaller operations, I don't think those things are a priority."¹⁴⁶

The author suggests that using these channels should be a priority. The evolution of social media allows for a kind of one on one communications between a politician and his or her constituents. Rather than relying solely on an often-biased traditional media complex to tell her story, a female political figure can tell it herself, directly to her intended audience.

Do: Partake in Media Training

An entire profession exists within public relations to train spokespersons for media interactions. Media training is absolutely vital to anyone who is the mouthpiece for a brand. In the case of female political figures, they *are* the brand, so it is only logical that before beginning her encounters with the media, she should undergo intensive training—and even consider refresher briefings before important appearances/interviews. Female political figures endure lines of questioning by press, usually about deeply personal details, that their male counterparts simply do not. The public also tends to be so much more critical of women in politics overall, so these women cannot run the risk of misspeaking or erring in presentation at any point. Rigorous media training can go a long way in both teaching the individual how to handle tough or inappropriate questions and how to stay on message at all times.

¹⁴⁶ Hughes, 2015

Several of the experts that the author interviewed voiced agreement about the necessity of media training and of learning to control the message. Cindy Montañez, from California's 29th District, shared that "I didn't do enough media training, but it's something that I, today, want to do more of, because I literally have to learn by being part of it."¹⁴⁷ She goes on to say generally that

I believe that candidates—I believe that prior to running for office, [candidates] don't do enough media training. [...] Spending time with someone who is going to help you field questions or work on presentation [is important] [...] Early in my career, I worked with people who [helped] me understand the press, understand the media, and learn how I am going to get my message across to the reporter depending on who he or she is.¹⁴⁸

Another essential skill that media training can teach is how to pivot from a question that you either don't want to answer or that doesn't get at your brand in a productive way. During her conversation with the author, Mary Hughes explains this very well. She says the following:

[They] can't quote what you don't say. If your goal is to announce a large policy initiative and you want coverage for that, you learn very quickly to respond and pivot. They ask, "Are you going to this event tomorrow afternoon"? You can respond, "Well I'm not sure about my schedule that afternoon, but my focus all week is on this new legislation for foster children". Whatever they ask you, you learn to pivot back to whatever it is that you want to talk about. They can't quote what you don't say. If the only thing you say is about your objective, then you're good, or else you don't get covered. You know, you haven't been clever enough in the way you've formed it.¹⁴⁹

The author contends that this pivoting technique is particularly helpful when a female politician finds herself being asked sexist questions. It is an effective, efficient way of shifting the gaze of those watching or reading from her gender to her capability and complexity as a leader.

¹⁴⁷ Montañez, 2015

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Hughes, 2015

*Do: Repeat, Refresh, Repeat, Refresh*¹⁵⁰

As in any branding strategy or messaging campaign, repetition is of the utmost importance. It is human nature that we need to hear something an absurdly high number of times before it enters our conscious mind. Repeating messages is just another step toward female political figures being legitimate in the eyes of their stakeholders and the media. This goes hand in hand with the need for proactivity in messaging. If a public hears over and over again that a political figure is “a bitch” that will permeate their minds. By the same token, however, if a public hears over and over again that that political figure is a champion for small businesses, *that* will be in their mindset. That idea has to exist in all of that candidate’s communications with their public. Mary Hughes explains communication strategy brilliantly, saying, “it’s a challenge for all candidates to understand that a good communications plan is like Baklava. It’s layer, upon layer upon layer. What you said in a press release, you say in a speech. You put up online on your website, a video of you doing that. You tweet the best quotes from it. You put on your Facebook page and people respond to it.”¹⁵¹

Hughes continues, “In a world where there are so many media outlets, the challenge is to get that message in as many of those outlets as you can and then repeat and refresh. Repeat and refresh, so that you have essentially owned the issue, owned the brand and owned the message.”¹⁵² Her words hit the nail right on the head. In today’s media, you have to shout to be heard and it is crucial for female political candidates to have their message heard.

Cindy Montañez echoes that sentiments when she says that “being consistent is really important because the ‘your name’ and ‘your policy’ has to stay out there. The communications team has to be really on top of it where you’re doing something every day or every couple of

¹⁵⁰ A phrase coined by Mary Hughes during 2015 interview with the author.

¹⁵¹ Hughes, 2015

¹⁵² Ibid.

weeks and you're tracking it to see what more you can do get your name and your public policies out there."¹⁵³ This best practice requires that both political figure and communications team be absolutely vigilant about messaging.

Don't: Rely on a Blanket Message.

A female political figure must not only be consistent with her message, but she must also be specific. While most brands have one overarching message, they also have smaller ones, dedicated to specific audiences. This is absolutely essential in political communications. Not every decision or piece of legislation is going to be agreeable to every constituent. The challenge then, for candidates or elected officials, is to know how communicate that information to specific groups. Cindy Montanez explains how she sees this particular practice:

Your campaign and your office is very much about 1) what are your policies, [and how do your policies reflect] your values, and 2) having strong communications team and being able to get that out and make an effective policy maker. With a communication's team, you're developing your messages, figuring out those messages and deciding what will be your key [one]. Who are the key constituencies they need to reach out to and how. How will I reach out to really targeted groups? If I need to promote a certain policy, I'm looking for a certain age group, income level or area, I need to be able to figure out with the rest of my team, how to target that message to that group.¹⁵⁴

Targeted messaging is very important, as it shows constituents groups that the politician is attuned to them specifically, despite the many diverse constituents they serve. Generally, these messages will be soused out early in a politician's career, so that their messaging is consistent at all times.

¹⁵³ Montañez, 2015

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Don't: Let Sexist Coverage Pass Without Confrontation

The author cannot stress how crucial this point is. Because in the end, so much of politics is a likability game, female political figures tend to stay far away from confrontations with the press. The result of this is that too many articles and features are blatantly sexist. The problem with letting this kind of coverage go past unchallenged is that it sets a precedent. It identifies that kind of coverage as the norm, as acceptable. Coverage like that, however, is too dangerous to be left undisturbed. Chapter Two proved how this kind of media bias threatens equality and balance in government.

Wendy Greuel, who has, in her career, faced vicious coverage insists, “When you see it, you call it out. Be vocal about the differences.”¹⁵⁵ The differences to which she refers are those that are found between coverage of male political figures and that of women. This tactic is a hard sell. No one likes to be told that they are biased, particularly in a public venue. Because of the power of media to disrupt political careers, political figures don't want to confront it. Women particularly run the risk of appearing “over-sensitive,” a gendered concept, ironically.

The author proposes this: every time a female political figure receives this kind of coverage in the media it is a crisis. An identity crisis. A brand crisis. It should be treated as such. It misleads constituents about that politician's brand and brand is the most valuable asset that that woman possesses in her political career. It makes it possible for her to succeed and to achieve her goals. If an article or story comes out that paints an inaccurate or distracting picture of her, it behooves her to correct it. Nothing will change unless this issue is brought to forefront. What better place to do that than in a public setting like the media.

¹⁵⁵ Greuel, 2015

Area of Attention #4: Authenticity is Everything

The author found a common thread in all primary research interviews and in a great deal of her secondary research. Authenticity is everything. The American people are not accustomed to female political figures and people tend to fear what they don't know. This, combined with an old and virulent propensity for sexism leads to a greater mistrust of female politicians. The result is that campaigns suffer because they try to hide the gender of the candidate. As previously discussed, Hillary Clinton's 2008 run failed because her team tried to run her as a man or at least as a genderless person. It became apparent that that is not a tenable way to achieve success as a leader.

Lindsay Bubar, a political consultant puts it perfectly when she says, “communicating authentically [...] t is really one of the most important things that we can do.”¹⁵⁶

Do: Relate the Personal to the Political

Female political figures should never have to make the choice to be a woman, or to be a politician. They can be, quite simply, both. The issue is that media, and society at large, see traditionally female characteristics as weaknesses. But these politicians are strong. And that is the great misconception. It is the responsibility of these women to show the American their true selves. In the over 100 years that women have served in government, there has been a tendency to force back their feminine qualities because of a perceived, and not inaccurate, public fear that their feminine qualities made them unfit to lead. Mary Hughes shared this with the author:

¹⁵⁶ Bubar, 2015

When I started this work 30 years ago, you never showed women living their lives. You never showed them cooking dinner for their families, you never showed a woman gardening, or in the domestic sphere, because that would suggest that she wasn't ready to be a leader. One of the great findings of research on gender in the last 5-8 years, is that voters accord women a great deal of respect and in some cases, it is a competitive advantage [for them] to share [their] experiences. So, if you were a caregiver for your father who had Alzheimer's, speaking about that, and why it gives you a particular passion and insight into the way that you feel about a particular issue—the healthcare issue in this case—is fine and gets you points. [...] We are in a particular bubble right now with women candidates where they have what I call a '360 degree wingspan' to show the entire experience she's had that will make her a good policy maker, a good leader, and a good decider of tough issues. I think at the moment, that is a tremendously important asset.¹⁵⁷

The author's recommendation, based on Hughes' point, is for female political figures to rely on the strength of biography to not only relate to voters and other stakeholders, but to show that every experience she has had contributes to making her a leader. Voters are more skeptical of female leaders, but what better way to gain trust than to highlight shared experience and challenges.

Don't: Act Like Anyone Except Yourself

American voters can sense disingenuousness. In fact, they expect it from politicians. The worst thing a female political figure can do is act in-authentically. It's truly devastating to the brand, particularly because these women are already at risk for negative coverage based on their gender. Lindsay Bubar spoke to the author about this very issue, saying

What I tend to see with female candidates—I honestly think they get bad communications advice—but they try to be something that they're not. They try to replicate what they see in the media [of] what a leader looks like and it is almost never who they actually are. I think that this was the problem that Hillary was facing people who were saying, "I can't connect with her" [or] "I can't trust her". I think she was trying to be something that she wasn't in an effort to counteract a lot of what we were talking about. Instead of doing that, [candidates should just be] their "authentic self"

¹⁵⁷ Hughes, 2015

and communicating as that is the best thing that we as a communication strategist can recommend and [...] advise our candidate to do.¹⁵⁸

In Summary

Being a politician is hard. It's hard from election to retirement, for all people who hold office. It is, however, harder for women. They face generations' worth of bias and sexism, from both men and other women. Media coverage, which is so crucial to the success of that person's goals, is a huge challenge, as it reflect that bias and sexism. It does at times seem an impossible cycle to break, but there are public relations best practices that can be used to mitigate them. The preceding recommendations may seem like common sense, but their application to a political figure's communication strategy has the potential to shift not only that person's position, but also the issue overall. If a female political figure and her staff choose their outlets wisely, build and maintain relationships in the media, control their narrative, and communicate authentically, they can bypass the coverage gap and gain equal footing. Maybe then, women in America can gain equal representation.

Conclusion: We're Not Going to Take it

A day in October...

It's October 13th, 2015 and the first Democratic Presidential Debate has just finished. The author sits in the lobby of the Wallis Annenberg Building at USC with a group of her peers, who have been watching with her as the debate plays on a three-story media wall. There is a panel of pundits, made up of students and local political figures.

¹⁵⁸ Bubar, 2015

The moderator asks the male adult political figure on the panel for his impression of the debate. His first remark is “Hillary just seemed so angry.”

He says this following a three-hour debate in which serious issues like gun control, national security and income inequality were debated and analyzed. Five candidates, to admittedly varying degrees of success, shared their views and their legislative agenda. The debate focused very little on personal issues, due to careful moderating and to a certain degree of respect between the candidates. Instead the debate revealed the substance of the candidates to voters.

But after all that, after a productive, complex debate, the only thing that this panelist could think to say was “Hillary just seemed so angry.”

Hillary Clinton has, by no means, a spotless record. She has undergone a media storm throughout her career, raking in more negative coverage, deserved and not, than most politicians and certainly, more than any other female political figure.

Professional pundits and others who unpacked the date, however, did agree, almost unanimously that Hillary Clinton won this particular debate.

This panelist used the word “angry” to describe a candidate who was actually collected, tenacious, and passionate—words that coincidentally might have been used if Clinton was male. This accusation is nothing new to Clinton. It joins a whole lexicon used to by society and by media to discuss her. Angry. Mean. Ice queen. Bitch. Man-eater. These are other commonly used terms to describe this and other powerful women.

This panelist and the author watched the same debate. They heard the same words. So did more than 100 other students in the lobby of USC Annenberg’s building and thousands of people across the world. All he heard was tone and all he saw was appearance.

The panelist said that his primary takeaway from the debate was “Hillary just seemed really angry.”

The author felt at once rage and renewed sense of purpose for this project. She felt frustrated and her hand shot into the air, determined to challenge this panelist for his bias and the careless threat of his language.

Frustration turned to something else entirely as hands shot up all around her. Young women around the room, and even some young men wore similar looks to that of the author. Obstinacy.

Women are tired. The author and her peers are tired of the continuing bias and the way that it deters us from becoming elected officials. We’re tired of a government that does not represent them and often, as a result, fails to serve them as they deserve.

While the author—and women everywhere—wait for the day when bias in the media ends and female political figures are covered for and judged by their strengths and weaknesses as leaders, communicators can make a difference.

Approaching Equality

By understanding the history and implication of gender bias in the media, communicators and the political figures for whom they work can take real steps toward mitigating the damage. It will a firm understanding of the people they serve, the people of the United States, as well as a strong sense of self, but it can be done. Public relations can be an invaluable asset to this cause. The methodical, practiced approach to communicating can give these women the tools they need to tell their story in a way that is not only authentic but that proves their legitimacy as ruler to their constituents.

It will take resolve. Speaking out on this topic, particularly as a female political figure can feel risky. But it matters. It's worth it. The author knows well that it can feel very isolating to be the only one in a room who speaks up. To be the one who reminds her male and sometimes female peers, that the language they use speaks volume about what they believe.

Back in October...

When the author saw the hands held resolutely in the air around her, her frustration turned to something else entirely. Hers wasn't the only voice in the room and that renewed her. The more hands go up, the more voices rise in protest, the better chance women have of having equal representation.

When the author saw the hands held resolutely in the air around her, her frustration turned to something else entirely.

Something like...hope.

END

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Appendix A: Communicator Biographies

Rachel Michelin

Rachel Michelin is the Executive Director and CEO of California Women Lead, a nonprofit association of women leaders that seeks to provide a positive environment for women in public policy to discuss issues and develop relationships, regardless of party allegiance. In the past, Michelin has served on the Public Security Disciplinary Review Committee for Governors Schwarzenegger and Brown. She received a BA in Communications with a minor in Political Science from California State University Fullerton.

Mary Hughes

Mary Hughes is the founder and principal at Close the Gap, a statewide campaign to recruit progressive women to run for office in 2016. She is also co-founder and President at Hughes & Company, a strategic communications firm and political strategy firm in Palo Alto. Through her work in politics, Hughes has advised candidates for president, Congress, state & legislative offices. She received her law degree from the University of California School of Law and her bachelor's from Mount Holyoke College.

Lindsay Bubar

Lindsay Bubar is the Principal at Lindsay Bubar Consulting, located in Los Angeles, California. She specializes in political strategy and consulting, campaign strategy, and messaging, communication, and outreach for female candidates. She has worked on a great many political campaigns in her career, spanning from candidates for city council to congress. Bubar is currently the Southern California Director for Emerge California, a group that trains progressive women to run for office. Bubar received her BA in Psychology from the University of Southern California.

Appendix B: Politician Biographies

Wendy Greuel

Wendy Greuel is a municipal politician from Los Angeles, California. She has previously served as Los Angeles City Controller and as President Pro Tempore and member of the Los Angeles City Council. She was a mayoral candidate in 2013 and was the first woman to participate in a mayoral run-off in Los Angeles. She also ran for a seat in Congress in California's 33rd Congressional district. Previous to beginning her own political career, Greuel worked in Bill Clinton's administration. She attended university at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Cindy Montañez

Cindy Montañez is a Democratic state politician and government affairs consultant from the greater Los Angeles area. She served as Assemblywoman from California's 39th Assembly District. She has also run for a seat in California State Senate. She was previously appointed to the California Unemployment Insurance Appeals Board and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. Montañez got her start in politics as a city councilwoman for San Fernando, her hometown. She attended university at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Politician Questions

1. On a scale of 1-10, how strongly do you think the media influences public awareness of campaign issues?
2. What do you perceive to be the media's relationship to female candidates and politicians?
3. What particular challenges do you believe female candidates face when it comes to the media?
4. As a political figure, what did your advisers tell you about the media bias you would encounter?
5. What was the difference between your expectations in this area and the reality you experienced?
6. In your experience, which media outlets/news sources have a more egalitarian spirit? Explain why you feel that way.
7. In your opinion, what steps can be taken to either gain fair coverage, or make issues and legislation the focal point of coverage?
8. What are the cultural barriers that prevent female politicians from effectively reaching their constituents with messages?
9. What do you envision the role of communication strategy to be in counteracting this trend?

Communicator Questions

1. On a scale of 1-10, how strongly do you think the media influences public awareness of campaign issues?
2. What do you perceive to be the media's relationship to female candidates and politicians?
3. What particular challenges do you believe female candidates/politicians face when it comes to the media?
4. As a communicator, what do you tell client candidates/politicians about the media bias they will encounter?
5. In your experience, which media outlets/news sources have a more egalitarian spirit? Explain why you feel that way.
6. In your opinion, what steps can be taken to either gain fair coverage, or make issues and legislation the focal point of coverage?
7. What are the cultural barriers that prevent female politicians from effectively reaching their constituents with messages?
8. What do you envision the role of communication strategy to be in counteracting this trend?