American Women and Politics in the Media: A Review Essay

The study of women and politics in the media is a relatively young subfield, blessed with scholarship from the fields of communications, cultural studies, history, sociology and political science. Members of these fields use methodologies—such as semiotics, qualitative analysis, and quantitative content analysis—to examine the content of communication about women and politics in news and advertising. Studies of the impact of messages use polls, experiments, and focus groups. Scholars draw primarily upon theories of framing (Entman 1993), hegemony (Gramsci 1971), and organizational structures (Epstein 1973; Sigal 1973) to explain why news content looks the way it does. Although most research focuses on content rather than causes and consequences, some studies are putting the pieces together to explain how efforts of groups and individuals influence coverage of women and politics and how audiences react to those messages.

Most of the research on women and politics in the media is divisible into the topics of advertising, and news coverage of the women’s movement and feminist organizations, first ladies, women candidates, women politicians, and women in the electorate. This list overlooks research on media agenda setting on certain issues, like child abuse (Nelson 1984), which could arguably be considered as “women’s concerns.” It also fails to consider scholarship on entertainment media because although there is much research on women in film and television entertainment, this scholarship does not focus on government or politics (as social scientists more narrowly define this term). Also omitted from the list are rhetorical analyses, although some of this research examines televised speeches of female politicians (DeRosa and Bystrom 1999).

First Ladies and the Media

Some research on first ladies and the media is embedded in those case studies that consider media coverage to be part of a larger, often historical, picture (Burrell 1997). Although some scholars examine campaign coverage of presidential candidates’ wives (Bystrom, McKinnon, and Chaney 1999), news about first ladies receives the most attention. For example, Scharer and Bissell (2000) compared coverage of the political and nonpolitical activities of three first ladies: Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, and Hillary Clinton. They found that all three received negative coverage when they were politically active.

Perhaps because of Hillary Clinton’s redefinition of the role of first lady, scholars have taken a closer look at the narrative themes that dominated her coverage (Gardetto 1997) and the strategic mistakes made by the White House press office when managing her image (Winfield 1997). Research on first lady coverage has begun to theorize about the cultural contradictions of the role and the problematic coverage this ambivalence generates (Brown 1997; Brown and Gardetto 2000). A focus group study explored the impact of the media’s Hillary Clinton coverage, and found that audiences interpreted her coverage differently based upon their political ideologies (Brown 1997).
Media Coverage of Women in the Electorate

The media’s characterization of women voters was not studied until 1980 when the media reported a gender gap. The media exaggerates the gender gap (Ladd 1997), focusing only on which candidate is winning rather than relevant women’s issues (Borgez, Goldenberg, and Kahn 1988). In fact, journalists often misunderstand the gap (Norris and Miller 1999). In 1984 the gender gap and the simplistic notion that women as a whole form a single voting bloc were virtually sold to the press by women’s groups who wanted deference from politicians (specifically to have Walter Mondale pick a female vice-presidential running mate) (Bonk 1988; Frankovc 1988). In 1996, media attention to the gender gap resulted from: the parties’ promoting women at their conventions; the marked difference of opinions between the sexes on political issues; and journalists who had for some time been sensitized to the gap (Frankovc 1999).

Another way that the media characterized the female electorate in 1996 was as “soccer moms.” Newspapers predominantly used this term, but television news and presidential candidate Bob Dole also discussed women as such (Vavras 2000). Not only did the media portray soccer moms as alienated (Poole and Mueller 1998), it exaggerated their importance to the outcome of the election (Carroll 1999). Both Carroll (1999) and Vavras (2000) criticized the media for grossly generalizing women and reducing them to depoliticized stereotypes whose only concerns were motherhood and consumerism (Vavras 2000).

Women Candidates in the News

Kim Fridkin Kahn has extensively studied how the news media covers women candidates relative to men, and the consequences of this coverage (1992, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1996). Her findings indicate that women have a harder time controlling the media’s agenda than do their male counterparts. Women candidates receive less issue coverage and more negative comments on their viability (Kahn 1996). Although some recent research challenges the extent of women candidates’ disadvantages (Rausch, Rozell, and Wilson 1999; Smith 1997), these studies lack the extensiveness and rigor of Kahn’s work. In addition, even these studies bring bad news for female candidates: the studies’ female subjects received more negative coverage than their male opponents (Rausch, Rozell, and Wilson 1999) and less coverage in open races (Smith 1997). Anecdotal evidence supports the notion that campaign news coverage disadvantages women (Smith 1997; Witt, Page, and Matthews 1999). Taking a cultural studies approach (rather than using a quantitative content analysis) to female Senate race coverage from 1992, Vavras argues that the media treats women candidates in a classist, biologically essentialized manner (1998).

Women Candidates’ Campaign Advertising

There is a great deal of scholarship that concentrates on the differences between the campaign advertisements of male and female candidates—but much of it is contradictory. Case studies (Scheckels 1994; Sullivan 1998) challenge the widely-held belief that women are less likely to attack in their ads (supported by Johnston and White 1994; Kahn and Gordon 1997). Much of the research on political advertising describes its content and production techniques (Bunce and Declercq 1985; Bystrom and Miller 1999; Johnston and White 1994), and some of it also compares the different traits, issues, and qualifications the candidates’ ads discuss (Kahn 1993; Williams 1994). The research that both surpasses simple analysis of content and studies the effects of advertising in experimental settings shows that women’s ads are less effective if the candidate is emoting (Hitchon, Chang, and Harris 1997), and work best if they emphasize stereotypical female issues (Lyengar et al. 1997).

Media Coverage of Female Politicians

Given the lack of research on media coverage of female politicians, it seems as though scholars lose interest in female candidates if they win their elections. Women Politicians in the Media, by Maria Braden (1996), is full of examples of news stories that trivialize and stereotype women officeholders, from Jeannette Rankin to current politicians who are quoted complaining about sexist coverage. However, a systematic content analysis of newspaper coverage of women in the 103rd Congress fails to find few examples of these (Carroll and Schreiber 1997). Instead, their coverage contained frequent references to women as the agents of change and to women’s issues (Carroll and Schreiber 1997).

Where to Go from Here

Much of the research on the media’s treatment of women in politics is clearly descriptive. Perhaps this is why only a few such research articles (Kahn 1992, 1994a, 1994b) have found homes in top political science journals. Building models to test the impact of media content on audiences and political actors might help to rectify this problem. Communications journals are fairly inviting to scholars of women and politics, and Women & Politics has been receptive to articles with a media focus. As for political communication journals, Political Communication has published articles on American women, but no such articles have appeared in Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics.

Those conducting political communication research about women need to broaden the topics, data, and theories they use. First, with the exception of some descriptions of news stories about Carol Moseley-Braun (Jelen 1994; Manning-Miller 1996), we know virtually nothing about how the news media covers women of color, nor do we understand these women’s advertising strategies. Rather than viewing women as an undifferentiated class, we need to articulate and explain how the media treats different subgroups of women, and why they do so. Second, political scientists need to follow the examples of others (such as Brown and Gardetto 2000; Sullivan and Turner 1996; Vavras 1998) and borrow concepts, theories, and insights from the field of women’s studies, which could assist us in providing more systemic explanations for why things look the way they do, and help us re-evaluate some of our assumptions. For example, the introduction of feminist perspectives might require that terminology and concepts commonly used by political scientists (such as “men’s issues” and “women’s issues”) be critiqued or perhaps avoided.

Third, we need to broaden the scope of our data. Despite most women in politics being in state legislatures and local governments, with a few exceptions (Larson forthcoming;
Miller forthcoming), we continue to focus on the news and advertising of Senatorial and gubernatorial candidates. Fourth, we need to look beyond the mainstream press to the “parallel sphere” (Herbst 1994), which is controlled by women and intended for women’s empowerment. There should be more studies of magazines such as Ms. (Farrell 1998), as well as of web sites and organizational newsletters. Finally, we need to stop talking about how women are different from men and instead consider how (and if) men are different from women. Although this might sound like hair splitting, it is important to combat androcentrism and to acknowledge that men are gendered too, and, as in the case of the gender gap in 1996 (Norrander 1999), they might be the ones who are changing.

References


and Janet M. Box-Steppensmeier. New York: Chatham House Publishers.


