Is Media Coverage of Women Presidential Candidates Sexist?
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RESEARCH QUESTION
• How does the media frame women presidential candidates?
• Is the way the media frames the candidate detrimental to their political success?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE
Find and analyze how the media frames women presidential candidates and determine whether or not these frames are detrimental to the candidate’s ability to be elected.

DATA COLLECTION & RESEARCH METHOD
• I collected data from 25 credible articles found in national newspapers, national news networks stories online, and well-known news magazines, along with three reading materials used in class.
• The method used to answer the research question was by analyzing the content of gendered frames and focusing on how Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin were portrayed in the media.

FRAMES

“First Woman”
• Occurs when a candidate is mentioned as the “first woman” to do something, this makes the candidate seem more like a novelty than a serious contender.
• Sarah Palin was mentioned as the “first Republican woman to be nominated for vice president.”
• The media recognized that if Clinton won the presidency she would be the “first female president in the nation’s history and the only former first lady to follow her husband in the White House.”

“Women’s Issues”
• The public expects female candidates to be interested in “women’s issues.” It may even raise a red flag if female politicians do not focus on these issues.

Family Situation
• The media frequently introduces a female candidate as a wife or mother.
• Many articles mention Hillary Clinton as being the wife of the former President, Bill Clinton.
• The media constantly talked about whether or not Palin would have time for her five kids and the vice presidency.

Stereotypically Feminine Traits
• Even though Hillary Clinton has been widely criticized for being cold and masculine, when she showed a vulnerable side she was harshly criticized.

Emotional Traits
• Women candidates are expected to use consensus-style leadership. This could hurt them if they are seen as weak or easily persuadable.

Appearance Content
• Appearance frames focus on the candidate’s style and how they look. When the media focuses on a woman candidate’s appearance it signals to readers that the candidate is less serious.
• The media loves to attack Clinton’s style and point out how often she wears pantsuits. Nevertheless, when she wore something more feminine the media still focused on what she was wearing.
• Sarah Palin was criticized for spending too much money on her outfits. (Although the media rarely focuses on how much male candidates spend on their suits.)

Gendered Stereotypes
Seductress
• This includes coverage of clothing, appearance, and feminine traits.
• Sarah Palin fed into the seductress stereotype by winking at the vice presidential debate and by having a background in beauty pageants.

“Child” or “Pet” Frame
• This portrays female candidates as weak or easily persuadable.

“Iron Maiden”
• This focuses on the masculine traits of a woman candidate. These are often mocked, and commonly make the voters lose their trust.
• A double bind exists here because a female candidate must strike a balance between being feminine but not too feminine.
• Clinton has continuously been attacked as being an “iron maiden.” She is seen as being masculine because of her powerful presence and her lack of femininity. One “Saturday Night Live” skit even made fun of her “cackle.”

CONCLUSION
• Gendered frames and content are extremely prevalent in media coverage of women candidates.
• Articles focusing on a female candidate’s appearance, family, emotions, personality, and other gendered content can really hurt that candidate by making them seem less credible and less serious about office.
• Frames and gendered content like this are tremendously detrimental to the candidate’s ability to be elected.
• These frames should be used cautiously since the media is often the only thing voters see of a candidate and can really shape how voters view a candidate.
• If we want women to be seriously considered for high offices, we need to allow voters to see the women candidate’s politics as much as we show her male colleagues’ politics, and not just focus on their appearances and feminine traits.
• The media needs to stop using these gendered frames and content in order for America to move forward and view both men and women politicians in the same setting.