Gendered Media Frames: 2014 Iowa Senatorial Race

1. Research Question

- Are media coverage and TV ads for women candidates gendered?
- Society has certainly progressed since the early 1900’s when women fought for the right to vote, but we are not free from discrimination yet. Scholars have researched the various types of gendered media framing that occurs during political races, and have found discouraging results. Whether it is blatant or subtle, we see media treat female candidates differently than men every day.

2. Gendered Frames in Politics

Carlin and Winfrey

- Sex Object: Focuses on the sexuality of the candidate rather than the real issues at hand. Mother: Reprimanding candidates for various aspects of their parenting choices.
- Pet: Female candidates being treated as children or pets by their male counterparts.
- Iron Maiden: The result of a female candidate taking on a tougher image rather than conforming to gender stereotypes.

Heldman, Carroll, and Olson

- First Woman: Focuses on female candidates running for office as an aberration rather than a serious candidate.

3. Examples From Past Elections

Carlin and Winfrey

- Sarah Palin was often painted as the “sexy ex-beauty queen,” exemplifying the “sex object” frame.
- The “mother frame” is often utilized by media sources claiming candidates were exploiting their children and neglecting their responsibilities as caretakers.
- Male candidates are more likely to use attack ads on their male opponents than female opponents for fear of being seen as “beating up on a woman” (Kahn). This practice illustrates the “pet” frame.
- Nutcracker toys were sold mocking Hillary Clinton’s strong disposition, which epitomizes the “iron maiden” frame.

Heldman, Carroll, and Olson

- The focus of the media on Elizabeth Dole as the “first woman” during her bid for the Republican nomination exemplifies the “first woman” frame.

4. Sample

- Print: I collected a sample of nine articles from seven reputable print media sources, and then did a content analysis for gendered frames within these articles.
- Campaign Advertisements: I used a sample of six advertisements: three from Senator Ernst’s campaign, and three from Bruce Braley’s campaign. Only one of these advertisements was an attack ad aimed at Bruce Braley, and two of from my sample were attack ads aimed at Senator Ernst.

5. Print Media

- CNN: “Too Liberal vs. Too Conservative in Iowa Senate Race” questioned if Joni Ernst granted an interview solely to avoid unflattering pictures of her running away. By suggesting that Ernst gave an interview because she was concerned about something as trivial as having a bad photo taken of her, this article supports Heldman, Carroll, and Olson’s findings about media coverage focusing on female candidates’ appearances.
- The Economist: This article framed Ernst as inept in foreign policy, which is often considered a “male issue.” While The Economist’s article didn’t strictly follow any gendered frames listed by the previous researchers, it implied that Ernst was incompetent and incapable of winning on her own and needed the inadvertent help of Bruce Braley, a man, in order to stand a chance.
- Time Magazine and The Des Moines Register: These two articles compared Ernst to Sarah Palin, a former female Republican candidate. Equivocating female candidates with past female candidates can be dangerous and misleading, as a chain of fallacious reasoning may lead the public to believe that one is just like the other, and without independent research or applying critical thinking, base their vote on those misconceptions.

6. Campaign Advertisements

SENATOR JONI ERNST’S POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS

 While “Squeal” and “Shot” both mentioned Ernst’s personality traits, the ads predominantly focused on policy issues, which aligns with Kahn’s research findings. By mentioning economic issues (typically considered a “male issue”), Ernst may have been trying to compensate for common misconceptions that females are inept in economic fields. In “Shot,” the narrator says that Ernst “carries more than just lipstick in her purse” (in reference to her gun) which may be another attempt at separating Ernst from typical female stereotypes.

BRUCE BRALEY’S POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS

- Braley’s advertisements mention abortion and birth control, “women’s issues,” in bringing up Ernst’s support for a personhood amendment. His advertisements also deviated from Kahn’s findings in that he was not reluctant to put out ads attacking Ernst. However, all of the advertisements in the sample align with Kahn’s analysis in that while the candidates may attack each other on policy issues, none are ad hominem attacks.

7. Conclusion

- Gendered frames are extremely prevalent in media coverage of senatorial races. Almost all of the articles included in the sample had some type of gender stereotype, whether blatant, veiled, or implied. Although it clearly wasn’t detrimental enough to have a determining effect on this race (as evidenced by Ernst’s win), I think gendered stereotypes and gendered framing can certainly be damaging to a female candidate’s potential to win a race. In a different political climate, we may have witnessed the effects of gendered media coverage on the outcome of this election. Of course, gendered framing can in part be a tool, either helpful or detrimental, depending upon the skill of the user and the thoughtfulness of the intended audience. While there may be slight electoral advantages in some gender stereotypes, these stereotypes are never an appropriate basis for reasoned decision. Elections should be fair and free of gender stereotypes, and free of manipulation based upon a candidate’s gender. The fact that a candidate is a woman has absolutely no bearing on her competency to legislate, and to lead.

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