Introduction

This research analyzes the gendered nature of media coverage of female candidates by comparing the campaigns of Joni Ernst and Bruce Braley in the 2014 Congressional election.

Frame 1: First Woman

The first woman frame emphasizes the path-breaking nature of the woman’s political career and thus portrays her as an anomaly and reduces her to a figurehead for women instead of a credible politician. (Heldman et al., 2005).

Frame 2: Family

Male candidates benefit from being portrayed as a devoted father; yet female candidates are often asked, “How does she have time for kids and [politics]?” (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers, 2011, 104).

Frame 3: Personality

By emphasizing personality, female candidates are portrayed as less knowledgeable and weak leaders due to the repetition of female candidates’ compassion and honesty. (Kahn, 1993).

Frame 4: Appearance

When appearance is mentioned in any context, the female candidate loses credibility. The mention of appearance portrays the woman as less of a human being and more of a figurehead for women.

Frame 5: Issue-Related Coverage

Overall, female candidates receive less issue-related or policy-related coverage than male candidates (Heldman et al., 2005). Consequently, the news media justifies voters’ doubts about the ability and credibility of the female candidate.

In the rare instances when issues are covered for female candidates, they are often labeled as “feminine” issues (Carlin and Winfrey, 2009).

Analysis

Ernst successfully secured her seat in the Senate despite the gendered media coverage of her campaign. She was able to appeal to Republicans, mothers, farmers, men, and veterans and withstand comments on her appearance and avoid time commitment questions because she was portrayed by the media as a pioneer woman or Annie Oakley (Reston, 2014)—strong, tough, and female, but still nonthreatening.