Utah State University
DigitalCommons@USU

Undergraduate Honors Theses | Honors Program

12-1-2009

Media Gender Bias in the 1984 and 2008 Vice Presidential Elections

Katherine Shaunesi Reeves
Utah State University

Recommended Citation
Reeves, Katherine Shaunesi, "Media Gender Bias in the 1984 and 2008 Vice Presidential Elections" (2009). *Undergraduate Honors Theses.* Paper 32.
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/honors/32

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact becky.thoms@usu.edu.

MEDIA GENDER BIAS IN THE 1984 AND 2008 VICE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

by

Katherine Shaunesi Reeves

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES
WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

in

Political Science
in the Department of Political Science

Approved:

Thesis/Project Advisor
Dr. Damon Cann

Departmental Honors Advisor
Dr. Veronica Ward

Thesis Committee Member
Dr. Vincent James Strickler

Director of Honors Program
Dr. Christie Fox

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT

Fall 2009

Abstract:

Media coverage in political campaigns helps shape public opinion and can be a factor in people determining how to vote. Thus, bias evident in the coverage of political candidates should be a concern for a society which values fair elections. In the 2008 general election, for the first time in 24 years, a woman was on a major party ticket. The treatment of female candidates historically has been sexist. To understand the media coverage of Sarah Palin I chose to look at editorials in *The New York Times*. I compared her editorial references to Joe Biden's in *The Times*. Then, to better understand the 2008 coverage and the treatment of gender in political campaigns, I analyzed the 1984 election. I read the editorials about Geraldine Ferraro and George Bush Sr. I looked specifically at the number of editorials which covered the candidates and how they were framed by *The Times* in those editorials. As a result of this research I found that the women were treated differently from the male candidates. They received substantially more coverage and were framed by their gender. The implication of these differences is that the women will have a more difficult time getting elected.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

A. Gender and the Media

B. Previous Female candidates

II. Theoretical Expectations

A. Agenda-Setting

B. Framing

C. Cultivation

III. Data and Methods

IV. Results

A. Agenda-Setting

B. Framing

C. Cultivation

V. Conclusions

List of Figures

Figure 1 represents the number of references in NYT editorials for each Vice Presidential candidate

Figure 2 shows the percentage of articles which used the professional titles of vice presidential candidates and the percentage of articles which referred to candidates by their first names. Some articles referred to candidates by both professional titles and their first names in these instances both names were coded.

Figure 3 displays the number of articles which referred to the candidates families

I. Introduction

The importance of media in American politics can not be understated. The media present political candidates to the public and it is through these portrayals that public opinion is shaped. Through the portrayal and analysis of candidates the media can have a powerful effect on the political process. If the media misrepresents a candidate it can lead to a change in election outcomes. It is for this reason that the media's treatment of candidates has often been examined for biased opinions which could potentially skew elections.

In the historic 2008 election, for the first time in over 20 years a woman was featured on a major party ticket. As the Republican Party's first female vice presidential nominee, Sarah Palin faced a great deal of attention from the media. The way that Sarah Palin was talked about not only affected the 2008 election; it will also impact how future female political candidates will be treated by the media. If the media treat female politicians differently than male candidates then they will be held to a different standard then the male politicians. For example, when female politicians' roles as wives and mothers are discussed in the media it becomes an expectation for female politicians to be good mothers, while there is not a similar expectation for male politicians to be good fathers. These added requirements make it difficult for women to break into the political sphere.

It is important to examine the way the media discusses female politicians because historically, women have been treated differently by the media. In order to better understand gender bias in political campaigns I have chosen to look at Sarah Palin, Joe Biden, Geraldine Ferraro and George Bush Sr.'s editorial coverage in *The New York Times*. Given the historicism of the two campaigns selected for this study, I would expect

to find female candidates being treated differently than male candidates; this will be particularly evident as the focus on feminine characteristics defines the media coverage of the female candidates.

A. Gender and the Media

When a woman enters a political race gender become a fundamental part of the media coverage. Even though women are not the anomaly they once were in the political scene, gender still becomes a central topic for these campaigns. "As more women run for and are elected to local, state, and national offices, the traditionally male-dominated world of politics seems to be eroding" (Huddy& Terkildsen, 1993). Huddy & Terkildsen's study explains that female candidates in politics have begun to erode traditional male-domination. The increase of women in US politics has been well documented throughout the media. The focus on gender has led to some positive and a lot of negative media coverage. Biases toward female candidates are often found in the media.

> The more obvious implication of biased press coverage is that it may make it harder for women to get elected… Less issue coverage, more physical descriptions, portrayals of women as losing candidates, and dropped titles may all make it harder for the next woman who puts herself forward for the presidency. For a society that prides itself on create a fair and equal political playing field open to all citizens, this should be of concern.
>
> (Falk, 2008)

In most campaigns, and especially in national political campaigns, it is unlikely that most people will personally know the individual running. Their information about the candidate comes almost entirely from the media. The media are responsible for shaping the public's perception of the candidates. "The media may contribute to, or even create, public perceptions about candidates' strengths, weaknesses, and political viability.

Such media perceptions may have a profound impact as well on the ability of candidates to raise funds and remain electorally viable (Paterson 1994, 97; Wayne 1997, 250).

There are an incredible number of factors which effect election outcomes, in any given campaign. While it is difficult to pinpoint election results to any one cause, "the inability to isolate exact cause-effect relationships is not to say… that media effects do not exist" (Graber 1997 in Rausch Rozell and Wilson #1). Many elections results are very close; even a few media-influenced vote changes can change outcomes. The treatment of female political candidates in the media is something that can potentially change election results. Even if the results of the election are not swayed by negative media coverage, the negative media coverage can be harmful and offensive in and of itself.

Given that the media does play a significant role in shaping public perception about candidates and that these perceptions have an influence on the outcomes of elections, it is important to study how the media differs in its treatment toward female candidates.

B. Previous Female Candidates

Since before women had the right to vote, women have been running for political offices in the United States. These women have dealt with the press critiquing their every move. They have been asked questions and have been described in demeaning ways which no male candidate would. During the 1984 campaign Jim Buck Ross, the Agriculture and Commerce Commissioner, asked Geraldine Ferraro, "Can you bake a blueberry muffin?" (Falk 52). This absurd question which had nothing to do with Ferraro's political qualifications would never have been asked of a male candidate. Questions like this are what force female candidates into this double bind.

Women running for political offices face a struggle which men do not. This is the "struggle to reconcile conflicting demands—'look like a lady' but 'act like a man'" (Gender Images in Public Adming, Camilla Stivers pg 63). Women candidates walk a very fine line between the two frames and are often criticized for being too feminine or too masculine. The balancing act forced upon female candidates is a difficult one for many candidates. As women try to balance these expectations they are often criticized.

> A woman candidate must be… assertive rather than aggressive, attractive without being a sexpot, self-confident but not domineering. She must neither be too pushy nor show reticence. The human qualities of compassion and sympathy must not resemble emotionality. Because society tends to label active women as pushy, aggressive, domineering or masculine, voters may be more ready to see negative traits in a woman candidate than they will be in a man candidate. They may perceive determined women as shrill, strident or emotional. A woman is easily discounted by being labeled "just one of those women's libbers."
>
> (Suzanne Paizis Women as Candidates in American Politics pg 94)

During Hillary Clinton's campaign for Democratic Presidential nominee, Clinton endured the press's consistent critiquing of her wardrobe. While other candidates' platforms were discussed, Hillary's latest pantsuit was the focus for much of her media coverage. When Hillary shed a tear discussing her campaign the press questioned her emotional stability. When she was assertive she was labeled as a witch. There was no winning in the press for Hillary Clinton. (NEWSWEEK 2008 http://www.newsweek.com/id/85609).

Clinton is not the only female politician to face ridicule because of her gender. "When Margaret Chase Smith was first elected to the Senate, the *Saturday Evening Post* published a photo essay showing her wearing an apron and baking in the kitchen (Schmidt 1996 in Falk 2008 pg 52). These stereotypical images undermine the victories of women.

In her book *Women for President*, Erika Falk discusses the media's treatment of Elizabeth Dole as she campaigned in the 2000 Presidential Election. Falk found that in 63.9% of articles about Elizabeth Dole her gender was specifically pointed out and discussed. Like many other female candidates, her appearance was discussed. One reported even commented about Dole, "she looks great naked" (Falk, 2008 85). These sorts of comments are what undermine the political viability of female candidates.

Comments like those listed above are directed toward female candidates only. Male candidates historically do not face discussions about their wardrobe. If males show emotion they are not deemed unstable, but are instead patriotic. These double standards set an uneven playing field for female candidates. The media coverage of male candidates historically focuses on their character and key issues in the campaign. Female candidates must deal with those issues in addition to many more which creates a burden upon female candidates.

II. Theoretical expectations

A. Agenda Setting

There are a few mass media theories which can help explain *The New York Times* treatment of gender in their editorials and the implications of that treatment. The first theory is the theory of agenda-setting, which maintains that while the media can not tell people what to think, it does tell people what to think about. "Agenda setting can thus be seen as… defining problems worthy of public and government attention" (Entman, 2007). Agenda-Setting explains that *The New York Times* editorial board did not tell people what to think about these candidates, but they did tell them who to think about. "Research in the agenda-setting tradition suggests that media attention to an issue may be

an important determinant of the salience of the issue in the public" (Stroud, Kenski, 2007).

When you are dealing with campaigns, issue salience can change votes and can even be a determining factor in election outcomes. Agenda-setting allows the media to focus attention on a specific candidate or on a specific issue. In regard to Sarah Palin and Geraldine Ferraro's media coverage, I expect that they would have significantly more media coverage than Joe Biden or George Bush. Also, I would expect the discussion of the role gender plays in the election to receive a significant amount of media attention. It seems that when women enter a campaign there is a shift in focus – from political issues to gender issues.

B. Framing

The second mass media theory which helps explain the media's treatment of gender is framing. Framing basically concerns selection and salience. Entman, one of the foremost scholars of framing used this definition:

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.
>
> (Entman, 2007)

By selecting particular issues to focus on when talking about a candidate the media helps shape the identity of the candidate. Given the traditional frames and issues related to women in politics, I chose to focus on three particular frames. The first and second frames both had to do with women being referenced as wives and mothers while men are more often referenced by their professional titles. The third frame was simply the gender frame, which I included to understand the context of most of the editorials. These frames

serve to reinforce and reiterate stereotypes for both the male and female politicians. Framing of a candidate is very significant because it can affect how the public perceives them.

In regards to the theory of framing, I would expect that the media would frame the male candidates as qualified and experienced politicians. The media will likely frame the women as mothers and wives. There will be less of a focus on their qualifications for the job and more of a focus on their role as women.

C. Cultivation

The third theory, the theory of cultivation explains the effect that framing and agenda-setting have on voters. The basic thesis of cultivation is that, "the symbolic world of the media… shapes and maintains—i.e., cultivates—audiences' conceptions of the real world (in other words, their constructions of reality)" (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1982).While the theory of cultivation primarily refers to television, "it aptly conveys the power of any mass media to shape our collective reality" (Falk, 2008). Through agenda-setting and framing, *The New York Times* editorials serve to cultivate its audience which affects the way that they vote.

The repetitive messages sent about the candidates may lead consumers to believe the message. It is through this cultivation that the media takes part in shaping public opinion of political candidates. While I will not be analyzing public opinion polls or voting results, I will be looking to see if the framing of the female candidates are isolated incidents, or if the same frames are used repetitively. If the frames used were used repetitively, then those are the ideas which the public were cultivated to believe.

Additionally, by comparing the 1984 and 2008 elections I am able to see how that cultivation has been adapted over time.

III. Data and Methods

I designed my study to be both a qualitative and quantitative study of the gendered treatment of political candidates in the media. Sarah Palin and Geraldine Ferraro were ideal subjects to analyze the media's treatment of gender. Both women were the first female vice presidential nominees for their parties. The women each held highly respectable political positions before beginning their respective campaigns. They each ran against a man who also had a strong political background. To form an accurate comparison of the media's treatment of gender in political nominees, the study includes the coverage of Joe Biden and George Bush Sr., the opposing male candidates. This allows me to compare the female politicians to the man they ran against. By looking at the 1984 and 2008 election I am able to compare the media's treatment of a female candidate in two decades and see if any improvements have been made.

One benefit to the women I selected to analyze is that I have one Republican and one Democrat. This allows me, in spite of political media biases, to show that there is a gender bias concerning these political candidates. Joe Biden and George Bush Sr., like the female candidates, each held a respectable title before they ran for vice president. Joe Biden was a senator and George Bush Sr. was the sitting incumbent vice president. Like the female candidates, the male candidates represent both the Republican and the Democratic parties, which will allow me to make comparisons based upon gender and not political affiliation.

In order to focus this broad topic and to come up with a detailed comparison of the media treatment of these vice presidential candidates I looked at one newspaper, *The New York Times*. I choose *The Times* because it is a standard in journalism and is well renowned world wide. I focused on editorials opinions which included all official editorials, unsigned editorials and op-ed columns. By focusing on editorials I was able to narrow the results even further. Editorials "are useful because they offer relatively clear expressions of opinion, and because the official editorials are likely to represent the views of the newspaper's owners, particularly at the *Times*" (Chomsky 1999). As a result they are likely to influence the ideological positions taken in op-ed columns and the less easily detectable biases on the news pages (Breed 1955). Henry and Tator (2002, cited in Foad, 2007) argue that "Studying editorials is of special significance when analyzing the ideological role of news media because editorials are expressions of 'the broader ideological stance of the newspaper's owners and managers.'" While the editorial page of *The New York Times* is likely to show a liberal bias, it should also be handed on gender issues.

Beginning on the date that their candidacy was announced and ending on Election Day, I conducted a separate search for each vice presidential candidate and found the editorials which mentioned them. For Sarah Palin that was August 29, 2008- November 4, 2008. Biden's candidacy was announced a week earlier so his coverage begins August 22, 2008. Geraldine Ferraro's candidacy was announced on July 19, 1984. Since George Bush Sr. was the incumbent vice president, it was assumed that Bush would continue as vice president. In order to maintain equality between the coverage analyzed I began looking at Bush's coverage on July 19, 1984 as well and continues through November 6,

1984. There were 312 stories coded in total. By looking at all of the editorials during that time period I avoid selecting an unintentionally biased sample. Additionally, since the time span of the editorials I looked at were roughly the same for each pair of vice presidential candidates, with Ferraro and Bush receiving an additional month of coverage in '84, the amount of coverage each candidate received should be roughly equal to their opponent, and I would expect to see similar amounts of coverage between the 1984 editorial coverage and the 2008 editorial coverage.

To avoid any false results in my study, I read each editorial in its entirety. This also allowed me to find things in articles which I would not have found by simply setting up search terms (Strickler, Reeves & Woodring, 2009). As I read each editorial I documented several things. First I recorded any mention of the candidates' family. This included references to spouses, children, grandchildren, parents, grandparents, and siblings. I made note of which family members were mentioned in each article. It is a common stereotype, "that women's marital status and role as mother are important whereas men's private roles are not" (Falk, 2008). By recording the specific family references it allows me to demonstrate how the media uniquely portrays women. Additionally we can see how the media's focus on family for female candidates has changed in the past 24 years.

Second, I recorded how often each candidate was referred to by his or her first name, how often they were referred to by *The Times* style honorific titles: Ms., Mrs., or Mr., and how often each was referred to by their job title. Each of the four candidates held a high political office at the time of their candidacy. Sarah Palin was a governor, Geraldine Ferraro was a member of the House of Representatives, Joseph Biden was a

Senator and George Bush was the vice president. It would be a sign of equal treatment if each candidate were referred to by their professional title as often as the other candidates.

> Though the ideology of separate spheres may be far from dominant in the present era, the cognitive associations of women with home and men with work are still part of our thinking and affect how women candidates are framed, and of course those frames work to reinforce and reiterate our stereotypes in society.
> (Falk, 2008)

The names that editorialists use to refer to candidates may seem inconsequential, but the trend to refer to show men and women in separate spheres depicts a bias. In an editorial published in *The New York Times*, (9/14/2008) the editorialist, Clark Hoyt, explains that *The New York Times* has a distinct style, which uses honorary titles like Ms., Mrs., And Mr. *The Times* called and asked both Ferraro and Palin which title they would prefer. Geraldine Ferraro asked to be called Mrs. Ferraro while Sarah Palin preferred Ms. Palin. These titles are used frequently through their editorial coverage. The use of these titles alone does not denote sexism; rather, it is how often these titles are used compared to the professional titles of both male and female candidates that will be of consequence. "According to *Times* style, official titles — senator, governor, secretary — are used interchangeably with courtesy titles, for variety" (NYT 9/14/2008). Hoyt claims these titles are used interchangeably, so one would expect both male and female candidates to be referred by their official titles at roughly the same rate. This is not suggesting that *The Times* intentionally changed titles for the female candidates to belittle them, but even a subconscious trend to label women differently entrenches these stereotypes. It simply shows that like the public, the media has been cultivated to accept and perpetuate certain stereotypes. .

The third and final thing which I looked for in the editorials was direct reference to gender and issues associated with gender. Many of the editorials about Palin and Ferraro talked about the historicism associated with having women in the campaign. These editorials centered on how to deal with gender in a political race. Many referenced other female politicians and some even gave advice to the male candidates on how best to address the female candidates during debates. In both 1984 and 2008 there were accusations of sexism and *The Times* addresses those accusations and even makes a few of their own. By virtue of talking about gender *The Times* helped make it the focal point of the vice presidential campaigns.

The framework of this study allows me to understand if the media made the gender the agenda, how each candidate was framed and which ideas were repeated to cultivate the audience.

IV. Results

The results of my data show that *The New York Times* editorials depict a gender bias. By specifically looking at agenda setting, framing and cultivation the biases and their implications are made clear. It is of particular importance that in examining gender bias we make note of the differences in media coverage between male and female candidates. Two candidates on an equal playing field would be treated equally by the media. Thus, any and all differences, even those that are not statistically significant, are still of note.

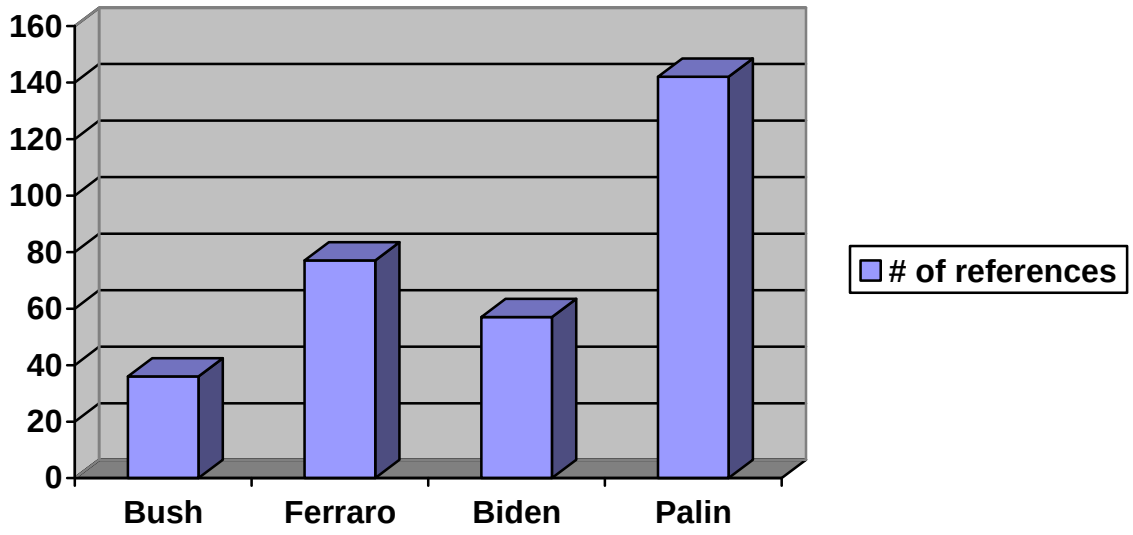
A. Agenda Setting

In *The New York Times* editorials there is a distinct difference in the amount of coverage given to the female candidates compared to the male candidates. In 1984 there were 77 editorials which mentioned Geraldine Ferraro, while there were only 36 which mentioned

George Bush. Ferraro was given double the editorial coverage of Bush. Furthermore, the stories which mentioned Bush mostly mentioned him in passing and simply referenced him as Reagan's running mate or as Ferraro's opponent. His qualifications, experience and the status of his campaign were discussed in less than 10 stories.

While Bush's coverage was almost non-existent, Ferraro received a great deal of attention from the media. Nearly half of *The Times* editorials about Ferraro talked about gender in the campaign. According to the agenda-setting theory, the media sets the agenda, and in this case the agenda became Ferraro and her gender.

24 years later the agenda was once again centered on gender. Joe Biden had a mere 57 editorials which mentioned him in the 2008 election. Sarah Palin was mentioned in 142 editorials. Palin's coverage was nearly three times that of Biden's coverage. *The Times* made it clear that their editorial focus was on the candidacy of Sarah Palin and not Joe Biden. When she entered the campaign she became the agenda, while Biden's candidacy was almost an afterthought. Of the editorials about Palin, 52 focused on gender. That is only five stories less than Biden's total editorial coverage. This suggests that gender is a large part of why Palin was focused on in the editorials.



[1]**Figure 1**

Figure 1 shows that the female candidates had more references than the male candidates. In a chi-square test of the number of references between Bush and Ferraro it yielded a value of 14.867, which is statistically significant ($p<.05$). In a chi-square test looking at the number of references for Biden and Palin the chi square value was 36.607, which is also statistically significant at the .05 level..

Similar to Bush's coverage in 1984, Biden was typically mentioned as Obama's running mate and as Palin's opponent, and was rarely mentioned for his own campaign. Biden's credentials and experience were mentioned through use of his title "senator" but were never discussed in depth. In Palin's editorial coverage her experience or rather the lack thereof, was the subject of many scathing editorials. In addition to focusing on her lack of experience *The Times* highlighted the historic aspect of the GOP's first female vice presidential pick and often discussed the role that gender was playing in the election, much like the coverage of Geraldine Ferraro.

[1] Figure 1 represents the number of references in NYT editorials for each Vice Presidential candidate

In both campaigns the female candidates had significantly more editorial coverage than the male candidates. Additionally, the focus of that editorial coverage, in both elections, became gender after the introduction of the female candidates. *The Times* agenda was clearly set on gender. The focus was on Ferraro and Palin and with their candidacy the men essentially became forgotten candidates. Agenda-Setting explains that *The New York Times* editorial board did not tell people what to think, but they did tell them to think about gender's role in the campaign.

When dealing with campaigns, issue salience can change votes and can even be a determining factor in election outcomes. While there is no clear evidence that by picking a female candidate Mondale or McCain lost, it is clear that the media, particularly *The New York Times*, had agendas which focused on the female candidates for both the 1984 and 2008 campaigns. Even if this agenda did not change votes, it still undermines female political candidates by treating them differently from male candidates. In addition to agenda-setting, *The Times* editorials also framed the candidates by focusing on certain features and aspects of the candidates.

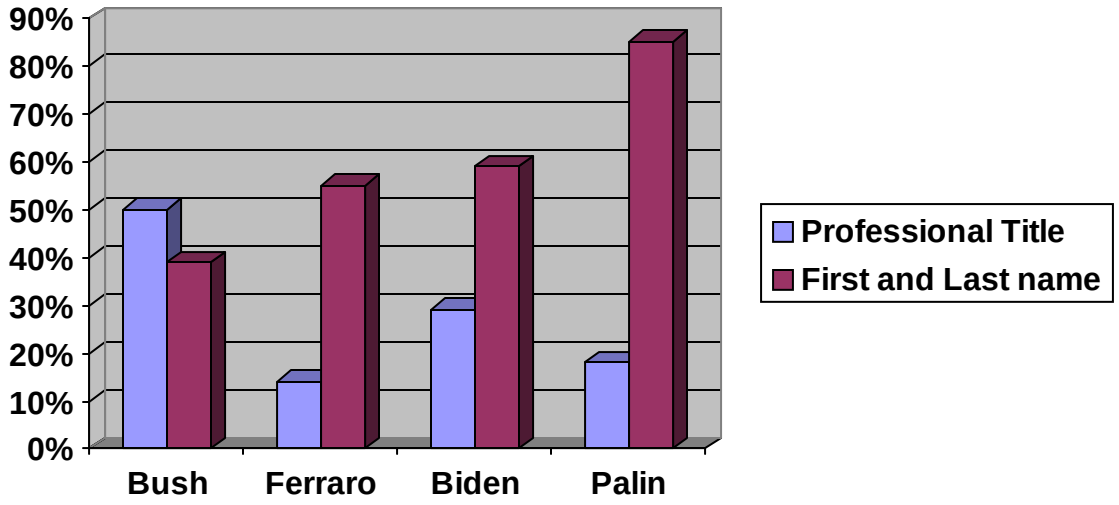
B. Framing

In my coding of editorials I found ample evidence of three frames: profession, family and gender. In looking at the frames which I specified, I found that the women were treated as I had expected. Their candidacy was framed by their gender. While it is not surprising that this was the case, what was surprising was how exaggerated the frames seemed to be for Sarah Palin, while Geraldine Ferraro's frames were less obvious. I had expected the media to improve in the coverage of female candidates over the 24 year time span, but found this not to be the case. Bush and Biden were framed in a similar

way. They were depicted as qualified candidates because of their professional experiences.

Framing of a candidate as a professional and qualified individual was examined by looking at the use of their professional title. Within a single editorial the candidates were often referred to by more than one title, all of these would be recorded. In the coverage of George Bush, he was labeled by his professional job title, Vice President Bush, 50% of the time. He was referred to by his first and last name in only 39% of the editorials. Ferraro's coverage, in contrast, did not highlight her professional experience. She was referred to by her job title in just 14% of the editorials. She was, however, referred to by her first and last name in 55% of her editorial coverage. In some stories the candidates were referred to be either Mr. or Mrs., or by simply their last names. Bush was called by his professional title in a greater percentage of his stories than Ferraro was.

In the 2008 Presidential election coverage, Biden was referred to by his professional title, Senator Joe Biden in only 29% of the editorials about him. In 59% of the editorials, he was referred to by his first and last name. Sarah Palin was called by her professional title in only 18% of the stories. This percentage while very low is not nearly as remarkable as the percentage of stories which used Palin's first and last names instead. She was called by her first and last name in over 85% of the editorials. In simply naming Palin and Biden *The Times* clearly treated the two candidates differently.



[2]**Figure 2**

Figure 2 demonstrates the concept that female candidates are talked about differently. This is shown in two ways, the first is that the women are more often called by their first and last names and the second is that they are less often called by their professional title. Four separate chi square tests were conducted to test the statistical significance for use of professional title and first and last name for vice presidential candidates in the 2008 and 1984 elections. In the first two tests the value of χ^2, for the use of professional titles, yielded results that were not statistically significant at the .05 level for both the 1984 and 2008 vice presidential candidates. In the test looking at the1984 candidates the χ^2 value was 1.73. The χ^2 value in 2008 was higher at 2.381. While these values were not statistically significant, we do find statistical significance when looking at the use of first name between female and male candidates in 1984 and 2008

[2] Figure 2 shows the percentage of articles which used the professional titles of vice presidential candidates and the percentage of articles which referred to candidates by their first names. Some articles referred to candidates by both professional titles and their first names in these instances both names were coded.

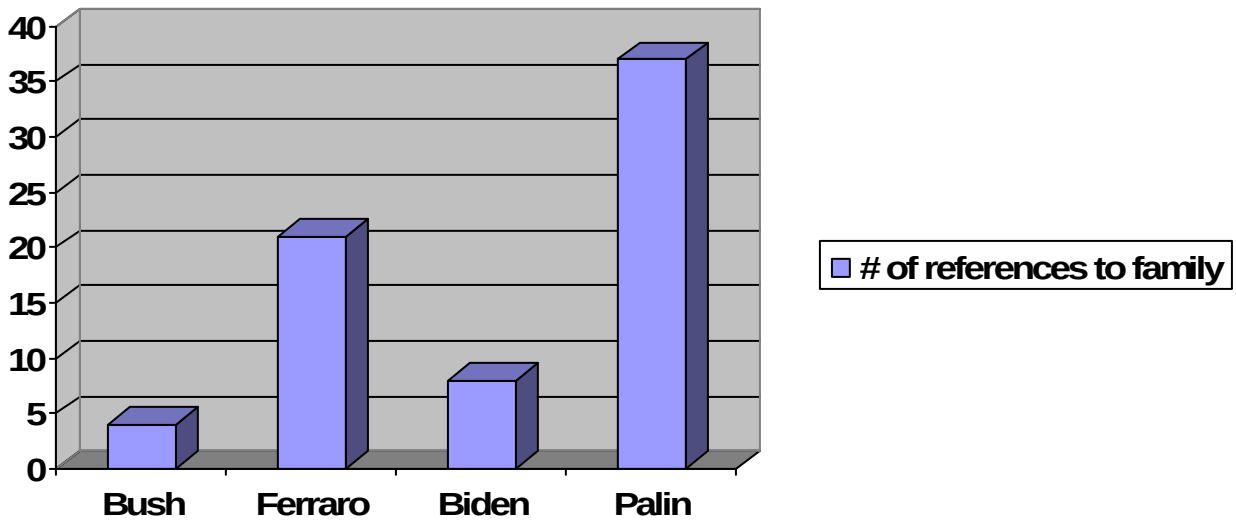
respectively. In 1984 the χ^2 value was 13.255; in 2008 the χ^2 was 41.264 for both tests, $p < .05$. These tests show that female candidates are significantly more likely to be called by their first names than male candidates. By so doing, whether intentionally or unintentionally, *The Times* reinforces the "ideology of separate spheres" (Falk, 2008).

> Though the ideology of separate spheres may be far from dominant in the present era, the cognitive associations of women with home and men with work are still part of our thinking and affect how women candidates are framed, and of course those frames work to reinforce and reiterate our stereotypes in society.
> (Falk, 2008)

The Times showed a lack of respect for Geraldine Ferraro and Sarah Palin by not including their professional titles as often as the men's. Through its labeling of candidates, *The New York Times* reinforced stereotypes of "separate spheres".

In addition to differences in titles used to describe the candidates, there is a distinct difference in the role that their families played in their media coverage. There were only four stories which mentioned members of Bush's family. Three of the four specifically mentioned his wife Barbara and how she referred to Geraldine Ferraro as a "witch." Only one editorial discussed the Bush family. It talked about the frame which George Bush encouraged the media to adopt concerning his family; that they were a normal American family, by pushing the notion that at the Bush residence, "your apt to hear regular-guy, locker-room talk any time" (NYT 10/17/1984).

Ferraro's family was much more prominent in the media. She was framed as a wife, as a mother, and as a daughter in 21 editorials. Many of those editorials focused on a tax scandal which surrounded her husband. While questions about his tax history may or may not have been truly relevant, the attention paid to her husband was never afforded to Barbara Bush.



[3]**Figure 3**

In **Figure 3** it is shown how exaggerated the family lives are for female candidates and what an afterthought they are for the male candidates. The female candidates received significantly more coverage referencing their families than the male candidates did. A chi-square test of the 1984 election values for the number of family references yielded a χ^2 value of 11.56. This is statistically significant. In 2008 we see an increase. The χ^2 yielded was 18.6888. Both chi square tests yield values which are statistically significant at a .05 level. In 2008 we see an increase in focus on the female candidates' family.

In the 2008 election, there were only eight stories that referred to Biden's family. Four of those referred to the death of his wife and daughter, the other four made passing references to his father, son and grandchildren. While there were only eight stories that referred to Biden's family, there were 37 stories that described Palin as a wife, mother and daughter. These editorials, unlike those about Biden, did not just make passing references to Palin's family, 11 of them talked about Palin's 17 year old daughter

[3] Figure 3 displays the number of articles which referred to the candidates families

Bristol's pregnancy. The editorials framed Palin as a controlling mother. "She's forcing her own daughter into a loveless marriage to a teenage hood" (NYT 9/21/2008). *The New York Times* editorials also described Palin as a "Wasilla Wal-Mart Mom" (NYT 9/8/2008), "the glamorous Pioneer Woman, packing a gun, a baby and a Bible" (NYT 9/14/2008) and of course as a "hockey-mom" (NYT 10/26/2008). While Palin embraced and encouraged the motherhood frame, *The Times* used it to belittle her.

There is a clear tendency of *The Times* to refer to the women's families significantly more often in editorials. This frames the women as wives and mothers, but does not seek to attach the men to their families. This reinforces another common stereotype, "that women's marital status and role as mother are important whereas men's private roles are not" (Falk, 2008).

In addition to the frames of profession and family, a third frame was common in the editorials, the gender frame. Throughout the 1984 editorial coverage there were frequent references to the role that gender was playing in the campaign. Ferraro was the first woman on a national ticket, some discussion of gender was to be expected, but rather than framing her as a competent, professional, female candidate, she was framed as a woman trying to break through the glass ceiling.

> We're proud there's a woman on the ticket. She represents the hopes we have for our daughters and theirs. She brings a clarity and common sense, a lack of pretense and a woman's sense of how to use power, in an unmacho way, to find equality and peace.
>
> (NYT 8/3/1984)

This quote, like many others, praised Ferraro, but only for her role as a woman and discussed how, as a woman, she would do her job. Some of the other editorials marginalized Ferraro by referring to her as, "one of the boys" (NYT 7/22/1984). While

the attention was placed on Ferraro, Bush went unnoticed. The editorials that included Bush typically mentioned him as a side note to either Reagan or Ferraro, or the editorials talked about what he was doing as vice president.

A similar trend was evident in the 2008 election. When he was first introduced as a candidate, the editorials framed Joe Biden as the "kind of vice-presidential nominee who could build a bridge to skeptical white men" (NYT 8/25/2008). There were high hopes for the strength that Biden could bring to the Obama campaign. After Sarah Palin was introduced as the GOP vice presidential candidate the media coverage became less focused on Biden and much more focused on Sarah Palin. Biden became a "forgotten candidate" (NYT 10/5/2008). Palin had been the governor of Alaska for less than two years when she was chosen to be John McCain's running mate. The media were given the opportunity to take someone who outside of Alaska was virtually unknown and present her to the country. Thus, the framing of Sarah Palin is of particular significance.

In addition to being framed by her family, *The Times* framed Palin by her gender. Palin was described as "a former beauty queen" (NYT 8/30/2008), "McCain's Mean Girl" (NYT 10/8/2008), and "our new Napoleon in bunny boots" (NYT 9/14/2008). The snide remarks and comments made in the editorial section concerning Palin were belittling to her candidacy. In one particularly scathing editorial the writer remarked, "I hope John McCain doesn't throw his slippers at Sarah Palin's head or get as acerbic as Henry Higgins did with Eliza Doolittle when she did not learn quickly enough" (NYT 9/10/2008).

In the classic Audrey Hepburn film, *My Fair Lady,* Professor Henry Higgins takes a bet that he can change the corner flower girl into someone who can pass as a lady in

fine society. By comparing Sarah Palin to Eliza Doolittle, the editorialist reduced Sarah Palin to an incompetent woman who needed a man to mold her. The *My Fair Lady* reference was not the only exaggerated sexist comment made about Sarah Palin, many other editorials mocked her role as a vice presidential nominee. They called it, "a Cinderella story so preposterous it's hard to believe it's not premiering on Lifetime" (NYT 8/31/2008). One editorial even asked why McCain would "allow his staff to put Palin on a couture catwalk in a tin-cup economy and then, when the price tags were exposed, trash her as a 'diva' and whack job'" (NYT 11/2/2008). *The New York Times* is considered a liberal paper, but these quotes do not show a negative portrayal of Palin because of her conservative politics, they specifically target her gender. Palin was framed as a novelty woman, among men running for the second highest office in the nation.

Many of the descriptions used to describe Palin would never be used to describe a male candidate. On September 24th Sarah, "speed-dated diplomacy" (NYT 9/24/2008). On November 2nd one editorialist questioned why the once beloved John McCain would "allow his campaign to get whiny, angry, vengeful and bitter? Why Palin?" (NYT 11/2/2008). One editorial even described Palin as having "pompom patois and sing-songy jingoism" (NYT 10/5/2008). All of these descriptions would never be used to describe a male candidate. No one would say that Joe Biden "speed-dated diplomacy" because it is demeaning. Nor would an editorial make disparaging comments towards a male candidate based on his gender. The negative gender framing happens to female political candidates and it is a disadvantage to them.

There are clear differences in how the men and women were framed by *The New York Times* editorials. The men were more often called by their professional titles and

they were less often called by their first and last names. The women's families were referred to nearly five times as often as the men's families were. These editorials support the stereotypes of men as professional and women as wives and mothers. The framing of Palin and Ferraro serves to perpetuate stereotypes of women. Simply by talking about the female candidates' families the media is not being sexist, but when they rarely mention the men's families and put so much attention on the women's families, they are propagating these stereotypes.

The most striking difference in the framing can be seen in the gender references. Palin and Ferraro's editorial coverage talks extensively about their role as women and Palin's coverage in particular uses belittling and sexist language. The focus on Palin was outlandish and far beyond that of any of the other vice presidential candidates included in this study. Bush and Biden are both treated respectfully as politicians running for the second highest office in the United States, while Ferraro and Palin are framed as wives and mothers who are novelty acts, putting a few more cracks in the glass ceiling.

The gender frame is not simply a matter of how often their gender was referred to, although the male candidates each only had a couple of editorial references to their gender and it was always in the context of the female candidates. Far more often gender was the topic for editorials discussing the female candidates. The gender frame is significant because it shows how far we still have not come. The media feel that gender still needs to be talked about, not just as a mention of historic value or as a reference point, but as the dominating frame. After 24 years I expected Sarah Palin's candidacy to be more about the issues and more about her experience, but the editorials make it clear that the issue was one based on gender. It is discouraging to look at the number of

disparaging remarks made to the female candidates that were based upon gender. It is not just that they were unfavorable candidates, it was the specific attacks on their gender that demonstrate a gender bias in the editorials.

C. Cultivation

The risk with biased media is that the public will be cultivated to believe the bias. This risk is of particular significance when dealing with a democratic election. In the case of most national elections, and particularly in the case of Sarah Palin, the media introduce candidates and through exposure to media coverage the public learn about candidates and form opinions. The significance in the case of Sarah Palin is that before John McCain picked her she was widely unknown to the general public. The media had a short amount of time to introduce Palin. While McCain's campaign specialists were responsible for creating her image and she was able to introduce herself in interviews and debates, the media still played a significant role in the campaign.

I am not arguing that Mondale or McCain lost because they chose female vice presidential candidates. Instead my argument is that because of the way the female candidates were treated, as explained through agenda-setting and framing, they were taken less seriously, by the public. As Falk explained, it is the differences in media treatment that pose such a threat to female candidate's viability. It is remarkable that after 24 years the media coverage appeared more bias toward women. This makes it more difficult for women to run for positions like vice president.

V. Conclusion

The data in this study showed unmistakable trends in the media coverage of vice presidential candidates. One would hope that after a 24 year hiatus from presidential

elections, the coverage of female candidates would have greatly improved. Unfortunately this was not the case. Geraldine Ferraro did receive more coverage in the editorials than Bush. Those editorials did frame her as a wife and mother and they did discuss extensively the role that gender was playing in the historic campaign. However, all of this was done to a much lesser extent then Palin's coverage. Palin received an incredible amount of coverage in *The New York Times* editorials. In her three months of campaigning she was subject to 142 editorials, more than one editorial a day. Sarah Palin was framed by both her family and her gender. *The Times* commented on Ferraro's gender, but they used Palin's gender against her, making disparaging comments about her "cutesy politics" (NYT 10/6/2008).

While John McCain and Sarah Palin worked to frame Palin as a mom they did not encourage the critical and sexist language which was used to describe Palin. The descriptions used to describe both women would never be used to describe their male counterparts. Palin and Ferraro both experienced sexist media coverage which is demonstrated by *The New York Times* editorials. The media made the women the agenda, framed them through titles and by their family and gender. Through agenda-setting and framing the audience is cultivated to accept these perspectives provided by the media.

While the women were subjected to sexist media coverage, the male candidates received little coverage at all. Bush and Biden were both forgotten with the introduction of the female candidates. The media sent the message that the male candidates really did not matter, by not discussing their campaigns to the same extent as Ferraro and Palin's. By diminishing the editorial coverage of the male candidates *The Times* downplayed their campaigns while exaggerating the females' campaigns.

If, rather than focusing on family issues, appearance, and gender, the media focused on the real issues of the campaign, the coverage would be more fair. If the women were treated with the same respect as the men, by using professional titles and not discussing their families, then it is likely that they would be taken more seriously as candidates. If the men and women received roughly the same amount of coverage and that coverage treated all the candidates with respect, then women candidates would be seen as experienced and as viable candidates. By treating the female candidates differently than the male candidates the media puts them at a disadvantage. This should be of great concern for a society which values fair elections.

Works Cited

Associated Press, (2008, September, 15). 'SNL' debuts with Fey as Palin, Phelps as host. *MSNBC*, Retrieved December 2, 2008, from http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26704596/

Carlin, D., & Winfrey, K. (2009). Have You Come a Long Way, Baby? Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in 2008 Campaign Coverage. *Communication Studies*, *60*(4), 326-343. http://search.ebscohost.com, doi:10.1080/10510970903109904

DeFleur, M. L., & Ball-Rokeach, S. (1982). *Theories of mass communication*. New York City: Longman, Inc.

Entman, R.M. (2007, February 13). Framing bias: Media in the distribution of power. *Journal of Communication*, *57*, Retrieved November 22, 2008, from http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/118502260/HTMLSTART

Falk, E. (2008). *Women for president: Media bias in eight campaigns*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.

Foad, I. (2007, April 04). A discourse analysis of elite American newspaper editorials. *The Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *31*, Retrieved November 21, 2008, from http://jci.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/31/2/140

Huddy, L., & Terkildsen, N. (1993). Gender stereotypes and the perception of male and female candidates. *American Journal of Political Science*, 37(1).

Rausch, J.D., Rozell, M.J., & Wilson , H.L. (1999). When women lose: A study of media coverage of two gubernatorial campaigns. *Women and Politics*, *20*, 1.

Scharrer, E., & Bissell, K. (2000). Overcoming traditional bojndaries: The role of political activity in media coverage of first ladies. *Women and Politics*, *21*, 55.

Stivers, C. (2002). *Gender images in public administration*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications LTD..

Strickler, V. J., Reeves, K., & Woodring, K. (2009). A Search for Ideological Identification Bias in Network Evening News Coverage of the United States Senate, 1991 - 2000. *Publication Pending*. Utah State University.

Stroud, N.J., & Kenski, K. (2007). From agenda setting to refusal setting: Survey nonresponse as a function of media coverage across the 2004 election cycle. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *71*, Retrieved November 22, 2008, from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=4&hid=117&sid=7b09e291-4b96-4bd8-b56d-b970013660a5%40sessionmgr102

The New York Times, Editorials

Geraldine Ferraro [7/19/1984 – 11/6/1984]

George Bush [7/23/1984 – 11/4/1984]

Sarah Palin [8/30/2008 – 11/4/2008]

Joe Biden [8/22/2008 – 11/4/2008]

Katherine Reeves grew up in Lindon, Utah. She graduated from Pleasant Grove High School in 2006. Later that year she began attending Utah State University as a Research Fellow and a Presidential Scholar. She began her studies in Journalism and Political Science carrying on with the subjects that interested her in high school. After two years she found that she was also interested in Women and Gender Studies and so decided to work toward an Area Studies Certificate. Katherine became involved with campus life as she worked with Housing as a resident assistant. During her junior year Katherine became very involved with Women and Gender Studies and helped reinstate the Women and Gender Studies Club, becoming a co-president. Katherine served as part of the Women and Gender Studies Public Relations Committee and worked to organize and publicize the annual women's history month event, the Barbie Bash. Katherine worked with Dr. Brenda Cooper as an Undergraduate Teaching Fellow. Throughout her three and a half years at Utah State Katherine worked with Dr. James Strickler on a research project. They studied media bias. Katherine was able to present the results of their research at undergraduate conferences in Utah and political science conferences in Vancouver, Canada and Chicago.

Following graduation in December 2009 Katherine plans to take a semester off as she completes applications for Teach for America and graduate schools.