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Media Framing and Female Political Candidates

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I. Introduction

While America awaits its first female president, the discussion of women in politics has gained more urgency than ever before. America has never had a female president, vice president, and representation is still unequal in Congress. Many studies have explored to reasons for this inequality and have found a difference in how women communicate, how the public perceives female candidates, and how the media portrays female candidates. While personality has been considered in these studies, the literature lacks a comparison between a male candidate and a female candidate with personality as the defining framework in which the media interprets and subsequently reports. In this paper, I will argue that the media plays an important role in framing the perception of female candidates. While these descriptions largely portray female and male candidates similarly within a personality-based framework, there are important exceptions that may have significant implications considering the media's power. My analysis will focus on the media coverage of the 2020 presidential election between Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren.

II. Literature Review

Virginia Sapiro, a leading scholar in the study of women in politics, clearly defines a main goal in the field: "A central research question for those who study women's political roles is why, given the lack of legal or obvious structural barriers to recruitment of female elites, are women still so underrepresented among political officials" (Sapiro, 1981a, p. 61). To first address this question, I first ask if women and men are different in ways that would be relevant to a political candidacy. Women and men have both positive and negative stereotypes associated with their gender. Schneider and Bos outline some of these stereotypes. Positive traits associated with women include affectionate, sympathetic, gentle, and sensitive (Schneider & Bos, 2014). Negative traits include whiny, nagging, spineless, and complaining. Men are stereotyped

positively by the traits competitive, daring, adventurous, and aggressive and negatively by egotistical, hostile, greedy, and dictatorial (Schneider & Bos, 2014). Nancy Adler discusses the benefit of certain stereotypes for women in what she calls the “feminization of global leadership” (Adler, 1997). She points out the increasing value of empathy, a trait attributed to women, in global leadership (Adler, 1997).

Next, I turn to review the existing literature on how the public perceives female candidates. Virginia Sapiro conducted a study in which a mixed gendered class was asked to evaluate a non-partisan speech. Half of the participants were given a copy claiming a male candidate gave the speech while the other half of the participants were led to believe the speaker was female. The results showed that the perception of the candidates were somewhat different and correlated with the sex of the participant and the perceived sex of the speaker. Both male and female participants preferred the male candidate, although men agreed with the male candidates more than women (Sapiro, 1981a). This suggests that sexism, whether subtle or overt, can also be found in women. It is important to note that this study is limited to a speech written on paper as opposed to actual exposure to the candidate.

Even when women are elected, Sapiro has found that female candidates do not focus on women’s interests. She suggests this may be a strategy to improve their electability and public opinion an important conclusion on how the public views female candidates (Sapiro, 1981b).

What has been discussed above are stereotypes of men and women, but do politicians neatly fall into these categories? Schneider and Bos studied how students described female candidates versus women in general. They found that female candidates are more likely to overlap with male stereotypes than female stereotypes (Schneider & Bos, 2014). This conclusion helps us understand that a woman, on its own, is not independently perceived by an individual a

condensation symbol. Condensation symbols are described by Murray Edelman in his book *The Symbolic Use of Politics* as symbols that take large events or actions and reduces them to a singular symbol that is based more in emotion than fact (Edelman, 1964). For example, if respondents had described an assertive, competent, and bold female candidate as whiny, weak, and nagging, we would understand that the gender of that candidate serves as a condensation symbol in which their personality is categorized with a large group and is not necessarily accurate. In this case, Schneider and Bos have established that voters are capable of avoiding gender stereotypes when they are not given a framework in which to interpret.

At this point, I have highlighted some inconsistencies among the existing literature. Sapiro's results show mild sexism, whereas Schneider and Bos argue that individuals avoid traditional sexist stereotypes. Nichole Bauer argues that women actually benefit from the defiance of female stereotypes (Bauer, 2014). The literature lacks a clear conception of how voters perceive female candidates. I argue that such a conclusion is not possible to identify because framing plays a large role in shaping perceptions of candidates.

One significant institution that facilitates framing of candidates and activation of stereotypes is the media. Previous research has shown that the mass media plays a significant role in predicting political outcomes (Bystrom, 2005). Furthermore, voters prefer candidates who the media portrays in a way that fits traditional stereotypes. Additionally, the media focuses more on the appearance, gender, and marital status of female candidates (Bystrom, 2005). The authors suggest that this may be a way to reinforce traditional gender roles of women as wives and mothers. The narratives provided by the media about candidates personalities have an effect on electoral outcomes (Peterson, 2018).

Hillary Clinton offers a unique case study considering her groundbreaking career as a woman in politics. Before her 2016 presidential campaign, Clinton already provided scholars with a case of public opinion strongly influenced by gender. Her poll numbers as first lady were negative. Robin Lakoff suggests that some of this may be rooted in Clinton's defiance of traditional female gender roles (Lakoff, 2002). Interestingly, media attention shifted more favorably towards Clinton after the Lewinsky scandal, in which Clinton better served her gender role as a wronged woman (Lakoff, 2002).

Considering the importance of media, their portrayal of women has a strong effect on their electability. Next, I aim to explore how the media creates a framework in which voters interpret information about candidates.

III. Media Framing Using the Big Five Personality Traits

Image refers to the media's portrayal of a candidate's personality. Perception is the attitudes voters have towards candidates based on their personality (Peterson, 2018). Personality cannot be objectively observed; instead we rely on images and perceptions to construct our attitudes. As a result, the "true" personality of candidates is irrelevant. What matters is the construct in which we interpret and understand candidates. The media plays a significant role in this framing.

Analysis of the media requires a way to deconstruct personality and image. Psychologists have used the Big Five traits as a dominant method to measure personality (Gerber, 2011). The Big Five describes a set of five traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness. Table 1 defines the terms, prescribes appropriate traits, and compares to a correlating term. The correlating terms come from research specifically focused on candidate personalities, whereas the Big Five can be applied more broadly.

Table 1

Trait	Definition	Traits	Correlating term
Extraversion	“An energetic approach to the social and material world.”	Sociability, assertiveness, positive emotionality	Leadership
Agreeableness	“Contrasts a prosocial and communal orientation toward others with antagonism.”	Altruism, tender-mindedness, trust, modesty	Empathy
Conscientiousness	“Socially prescribed impulse control that facilitates task and goal directed behavior.”	Thinking before acting, delaying gratification, following norms and rules, planning, organizing, prioritizing tasks	Integrity
Emotional Stability	“Even-temperedness and contrasts with negative emotionality, such as feeling anxious, nervous, sad, and tense.”	Even-temperedness	N/A
Openness	“Contrasts close-mindedness with “a breadth, depth, originality, and complexity of an individual’s mental and experimental life.”	Complexity, Flexibility	Competence

Sources: Gerber, A. S., Huber, G. A., Doherty, D., & Dowling, C. M. (2011). The Big Five Personality Traits in the Political Arena. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 14(1), 265–287. doi: 10.1146/annurev-polisci-051010-111659, McGraw, K. M., Fischle, K., Stenner, M., & Lodge, K. (1996). What's in a Word? *Political Behavior*, 18(3), 263–287.

Voters are more likely to favor candidates that fall on the positive side of the scale, meaning they prefer candidates who are closer to these definitions and farther from their opposites (Peterson, 2018).

IV. Methodology

To evaluate the media portrayal of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, I evaluated the online articles published by *The New York Times*. I selected *The New York Times* because it is a trusted and credible national newspaper that has little bias according to “The Media Bias Chart” produced by Ad Fontes. I selected newspaper sources and not cable news because of cable news’ lack of reliable and factual information. All op-eds or opinion pieces were excluded from my data. Since my question does not ask about partisanship, I wanted to use the most neutral sources for data.

I limited my data to the articles that pertained to the seventh Democratic debate, which occurred on January 14th, 2020. Any article discussing the seventh debate that was published on or after January 14th and before the eighth debate on February 7th was included. Articles in this time period that did not discuss the debate were excluded.

The seventh Democratic debate was significant for the Warren and Sanders campaigns. Prior to the debate, Warren confirmed a rumor that Sanders privately told her he did not believe a woman could be president. Warren and Sanders had a heated discussion about the event in question. After the debate, Warren refused to shake Sanders’ hand. The two engaged in a heated conversation off mic in which Sanders walks away. Later, audio footage was released in which Warren tells Sanders that he called her a liar. Sanders then says Warren called him a liar. I chose this debate because of the ample and fairly evenly distributed news coverage of the two candidates.

In order to interpret the data, I called upon the Big Five personality traits. Though the Big Five originated with traditional psychology, it has also been applied to political science (Gerber, 2010). Additionally, my application of the Big Five deviates from its traditional use in which an observer describes an individual. I add an intermediary, the media, into the process. Peterson

argues that “[t]he link between language and person perception is strong enough that the same connections should exist in the work of journalists...journalists impressions of the candidates will be reinforcing, leading the media as a whole to settle on a narrative about the candidates image” (Peterson, 2018 pp. 291). Not only does Peterson argue the Big Five technique is applicable, but he argues that journalists may actually use language to convey the Big Five in a more consequential way.

My study is limited in that only two candidates were evaluated. Of course, since the data was circumstantial, other factors including partisanship may influence media coverage. Finally, the assessment does not confirm nor deny the presence or absence of these personality traits in Sanders and Warren. I do not aim to assess the accuracy of the media’s personality descriptions. Instead, I wish to seek if there is a significant difference between how the media describes Warrens’ and Sanders’ personalities. However, as previously discussed, politicians in general share many personality traits, so one does not expect a significant difference in the results of my study (Schneider & Bos, 2014).

V. Results

A total of twelve articles met the aforementioned criteria and were subsequently evaluated. The results are detailed in Table 1. Positive indicates descriptions that are closer to the Big Five personality traits listed. Negative indicates descriptions that are opposite the personality types listed.

Table 1

	Warren		Sanders	
Mention Type	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Extraversion	8	2	15	1
Agreeableness	11	29	10	30
Conscientiousness	6	1	3	1
Emotional Stability	3	2	3	1
Openness	2	0	0	1

Results were similar between Warren and Sanders with neuroticism and openness, which were also the two least mentioned personality traits. Sanders was described as extraverted 15 times compared to Warren's 8. Warren was considered conscientious in 6 instances whereas with Sanders the number was lower at 3. Both candidates were described as disagreeable significantly more than any other personality trait: Warren had 29 mentions and Sanders had 30 mentions. All other data was similar between the two candidates.

VI. Discussion

In most instances, the media did not describe either candidate's personality more frequently or differently. In only two categories did the media describe the candidates differently. Sanders was described more often to be extraverted and Warren was described as more conscientious. As such, my question regarding whether the media describes candidates of different genders differently cannot be uniformly answered and instead must be reviewed in consideration of each personality trait.

The results contrast the research Schneider and Bos performed regarding independent perception of stereotypes. They suggest that leadership (associated with extraversion) is

stereotypically male trait and that integrity (associated with conscientiousness) is stereotypically female. However, they argue that female candidates do not align with traditional female stereotypes and instead are viewed as having masculine traits. Warren's narrative describes her as aligning with the traditional female stereotype of integrity (Schneider and Bos, 2014).

In comparing the Big Five traits with those used by McGraw et al. to describe political candidates specifically, my results suggest Warren is portrayed in the media as having more integrity, whereas Sanders is portrayed as being more of a leader. Future research may seek to discover whether leadership or integrity is more important to voters.

My study was limited to evaluating the differences in how the media describes male and female candidates. Political psychologists may wish to continue this study and evaluate whether the descriptions used by the media reflected the behavior the candidates exhibited during the debates.

VII. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how framing influences how voters perceive candidates. Further, I have shown that the media plays a role in framing female and male candidates as having unique strengths and weaknesses. Though the candidates were framed similarly in most categories, their differences are notable because of the media's strong influence on voter behavior and public opinion. As a result, voters and scholars alike should more seriously consider the implications of the media on the lack of female representation in government. Female candidates may also be influenced by this research to find more ways to engage with voters directly in order to remove the framing that occurs in the media. As previously mentioned, sexism among voters is not clearly determined or understood. Media framing, however, can influence voters and both encourage or discourage sexism, depending on how language is used.

Edelman argues that due to the lack of direct involvement in most of the population in politics, politics is composed of symbols that communicate messages to the masses (Edelman, 1964). Sometimes these symbols are created by candidates, but I have shown that the media is capable of creating symbols, too. Women are broadly categorized and distilled into a single symbol, which may provide a significant obstacle in their attempt at higher office.

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