Gendered Media Coverage of Female Governors

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Introduction

An article entitled “Why Do We Give Women Candidates Such a Hard Time?” appeared in *Cosmopolitan* magazine in November 2014 which highlighted female political candidates and how the media covered their campaigns (Scovell). The article focused on politicians including Hillary Clinton, Wendy Davis, Christy Quinn, Wendy Greuel, and Sarah Palin and discussed how news stories and the media focused in some part on how they dressed and how the media criticized them for not being family-oriented enough or for various personal matters. The story made it clear that these women felt as though the media treated them differently based on their gender and that this may have also affected how voters perceived them. Many of the women in the article ran in national campaigns, except Christine Quinn who ran for mayor of New York, but their anecdotal experiences can certainly be pertinent to the understanding of how the media can shape the experiences of female candidates at the state level.

According to the Center for American Women and Politics the amount of women serving in state legislatures has grown five-times since 1971 and currently nearly twenty-five percent of state legislators are women (2014). Women have increased their representation in state legislatures but currently only five states, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, New Hampshire, and South Carolina, have governors who are women. This sample of women, although small, can be used to study whether or not coverage of male and female officeholders differs in some way. Do these female governors experience different media coverage, either currently during their time in office or during their campaign for office, than their male counterparts? Research would suggest that the media can cover male and female politicians differently, or at least focus on different aspects regarding women candidates versus male candidates.

Literature Review

There is a large body of research that focuses on female candidates in public offices, both at the state and federal levels, and how their experiences may differ from their male counterparts (Dittmar 2015; Thomas and Wilcox 2014; Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Fox and Lawless 2010; Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001; Costantini 1990). While much of the research in this area is focused at the federal level there are studies that examine candidates who run for state level public offices, including female gubernatorial candidates (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Windett 2011; Rombough and Keithly 2010). Women have been found to be less likely to run for public office, at any level of government, because they do not consider themselves qualified enough to run or be elected (Fox and Lawless 2004; Fox and Lawless 2005). These factors have been found to affect the ways in which female candidates for both federal and state level offices emerge. In addition it is important for studies to highlight gender discrepancies in elections because research has found that gender stereotypes affect candidates during campaigns and elections (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Burrell 1996). While research has found that voters are willing to vote for female candidates they have also been found to stereotype female candidates based upon their gender (Thomas and Wilcox 2014).

Stereotypes that exist about gender differences can play a role in women being reluctant to enter politics (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013). While there are far fewer women who serve as elected officials than men the rates of women who serve have improved over time at both the federal and state levels (Center for American Women and Politics 2014; Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013). Some research has found that there is somewhat of a historical basis for why women are elected at higher rates in some areas and states than others. Windett (2011) found that states with a history of progressive views and gender equity in areas including education, the workforce, and political representation, along with a history of women winning elections are more likely to continue to elect female candidates to state-level public offices. Research also posits that some areas of the country are more conducive for female candidates to run in than other areas (Rombough and Keithly 2010; Williams 1990).

Much of the research that deals with gender discrepancies between male and female political candidates focuses on the barriers that make men and women’s experiences different (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Bode and Hennings 2012; Rombough and Keithly 2010; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994). Some studies of media coverage and gender argue that media coverage is different for men and women because men received more attention than women (Thomas and Wilcox 2014; Rombough and Keithly 2010; Kahn and Goldenberg 1991), but Bode and Hennings (2012) argue that that trend has changed in more recent years with male and female candidates receiving comparable attention in the media during their campaigns. Other studies argue that the media covers male and female candidates differently and has the tendency to cover women in ways that weakens their viability as candidates (Rombough and Keithly 2010; Kropf and Boiney 2001) or that focuses more negative attention on female candidate than male candidates (Thomas and Wilcox 2014).

Focusing more on gendered stereotypes when covering women is one way in which the media is argued to diminish female candidates (Bligh et. al. 2011). These stereotypes arise in several ways. Discussions of emotions, family, and personal information about candidates have been found to be present in more coverage of female candidates than male candidates and the media has also been found to link certain policies and issues to women running for office and different ones to men running for office. The media tends to attribute education, health care, and poverty to female candidates and male candidates are linked to policies dealing with the economy, foreign affairs, and defense (Bode and Hennings 2012). Thomas and Wilcox (2014) argue that the media tend to treat male and female candidates differently because the media are more likely to report on women’s appearances and family than men’s appearances and family. The term “soccer moms” has been used to characterize female voters and campaigns in the past have focused on this generalized group as an important part of campaigns. Vavrus (2000) and Carroll (1999) criticize the term for overgeneralizing women and reducing them to stereotypes. Other research has also focused on how female candidates tend to have their appearances focused on more often when compared to their male counterparts (Bode and Hennings 2012; Falk 2008).

        The main research questions that will drive the paper is, is media coverage of female gubernatorial candidates gendered, or focused on their gender specifically, in any way? Previous research has indicated that gender stereotyping can affect candidates so this paper will take a case-study approach to each of the four current female governors to determine if there is any evidence of media coverage of them being gendered in any way.

Data and Methods

This paper focuses on potential differences in media coverage for female and male candidates, but more specifically on media coverage of female gubernatorial candidates. The five female governors currently serving, including Jan Brewer of Arizona, Mary Fallin of Oklahoma, Nikki Haley of South Carolina, Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire, and Susana Martinez of New Mexico, will be used as data. They represent a small sample overall of governors in the United States but the complete sample of women who are serving as governors currently. The media coverage of each of these five women can offer a snapshot of whether or not media coverage is overtly different for female governors. Biographical and other basic information about each governor is collected from the Center for American Women and Politics and newspaper coverage of each governor is from the *Lexis Nexis* database. A content analysis of the new stories of each governors is conducted to determine if any articles discuss how gender may play a role in the governors’ campaigns or their time in office. A search is done for each governor’s name and then the word “gender” was searched for within those results. Article that had gender, sex, or sexism in the title were identified. The results that come up in the search for each governor’s name plus gender are skimmed to determine what the articles are about. Articles were considered irrelevant to the content analysis if they only identified the governors as a woman or if they only offered basic biographical information about the women.

In order to allow for some comparison through a control group *Lexis-Nexis* searches were also done for the male opponents of the five female governors in the same way that they were done for the female governors as discussed above. If the women used in this dataset have run in more than one gubernatorial election their opponent from their most recent campaign was used for this study. Terry Goddard (Janet Brewer’s opponent), Vincent Sheheen (Nikki Haley’s opponent), Walt Havenstein (Maggie Hassan’s opponent), and Gary King (Susana Martinez’s opponent) were used for the analysis. The results that come up for through their *Lexis-Nexis* searches for the men are analyzed to see if there are trends in what the news articles that discuss them are about. Only four men are used in the control group because one of the female governors, Mary Fallin, ran against another woman in her gubernatorial campaign. The control group’s purpose is to compare coverage across gender so Fallin’s opponent is not a part of the control group.

Results

The *Lexis-Nexis* searches for each of the 5 female governors yielded a variety of results. See Table 1 for a comparison of information about each of the 5 female governors in this study. All of the female governors had newspaper articles written about her that focused on her gender in some way, but not all of the articles that wrote about gender cast being a female candidates as a negative thing.

Table 1: Female Governors

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | State | Party | Year First Elected | First Female Governor in her state? |
| Nikki Haley | South Carolina | Republican | 2010 | Yes |
| Jan Brewer | Arizona | Republican | 2010 | No |
| Mary Fallin | Oklahoma | Republican | 2010 | Yes |
| Maggie Hassan | New Hampshire | Democrat | 2012 | No |
| Susana Martinez | New Mexico | Republican | 2010 | Yes |

Several of the women had articles written about them that praised them for paving the way for other women and for making history in their states. Articles that were negative in nature explained how women had certain shortcomings. Some articles discussed how the women faced sexism in some way during their campaigns or while serving as governor but they were critical of the sexist treatment so they were considered positive in nature. See Table 2 for a breakdown of how many articles were found for each woman and how many of the article were positive in nature and how many were negative in some way. The search results for each female governor are discussed in order to compare and contrast their circumstances.

Table 2: Positive and Negative Newspaper Coverage of Female Governors

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | "Positive" Articles | "Negative" Articles |
| Nikki Haley | 5 | 2 |
| Jan Brewer | 1 | 0 |
| Mary Fallin | 4 | 1 |
| Maggie Hassan | 3 | 2 |
| Susana Martinez | 5 | 0 |

Nikki Haley

Nikki Haley is a Republican and was elected to be the governor of South Carolina in 2010. She won re-election in November 2014. Before her time as governor Haley was a businesswoman and then served in the South Carolina House of Representatives from 2005 to 2011 and was the majority whip from 2007 to 2011 (Heinze 2012; CAWP Statewide Elective Executive Office Women Fact Sheet 2014). She has also garnered attention for and has been accredited with breaking down barriers because she is an Indian-American. Haley is also the first female and youngest governor to ever serve in South Carolina, and is its first Indian governor as well (Heinze 2012).

A *Lexis-Nexis* search of newspapers for Nikki Haley brought up 997 search results. From there the term “gender” was searched for within those results and 26 results were garnered. A search of those 26 results found 14 of them referencing gender in some way. Two of the articles addressed how Haley has bridged a gap and has made gender not as “big of a deal” in campaigns as it once was. Three of the articles deal with how Hayley has contributed to the changing face of the Republican Party by being a woman. One article entitled, “Haley dismisses Democratic rival’s racist, sexist slur” from October 2014 discusses how Haley brushed off a comment made by her Democratic opponent. Haley also called a fellow Republican a sexist which was discussed in the article, “Nikki Haley calls Republican accuser a racist, sexist bigot” from June 2012. The story explains how Haley criticized John Rainey after he accused her of ethics violations when she was a member of the South Carolina State House of Representatives. The article from April 2012 titled, “Soccer moms will be key for Romney” cites Haley as a source of support for then presidential candidate Mitt Romney because she appeals to so-called “soccer moms”. However, the article is also critical of Haley because of allegations of adultery she faced in the past. The article calls the responses that were paid to the accusations the result of “a nasty campaign” but also a “big campaign issue” for Haley.

While Haley is the subject of negative attention based upon her gender some of the news stories do focus on how she is helping change the negative stereotyping female candidates face. A story in the *Christian Science Monitor* highlighted Haley as a woman whose political campaign was affected by media coverage that, “distracted the public from judging them primarily on their professional qualifications” by focusing on sexist comments (Hunt and Healey 2010). The article goes on to explains how when Haley won her gubernatorial nomination there were stories about her which asked, “if she was hotter than Sarah Palin” and not how well she would be able to govern.

Jan Brewer

Jan Brewer initially became the governor of Arizona by constitutional successions after her predecessor resigned to become the secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Brewer, a Republican, was elected to a full term as governor in 2010 and previously served as Secretary of State in 2002 and 2006, a Maricopa County Supervisor from 1997 to 2002. She also served in Arizona’s House of Representatives and Senate from 1983 to 1996 (CAWP Statewide Elective Executive Women Fact Sheet 2014). Unlike Haley, Brewer was not the first female governor of her state. The *Lexis-Nexis* results for Brewer also differ greatly when compared to Haley. Brewer’s name alone brought over 900 results but the refined search for Governor Jan Brewer only yielded 58 search results. When the search for the term gender was done only one article came up and it was unrelated to Brewer. For this reason another slightly different search was done. Searching for Governor Jan Brewer plus the term female brought 14 results. Many of these 14 results were press releases which only mentioned Brewer in her role as governor. Some of the results were stories about Brewer criticizing President Obama in terms of immigration policy and only one story highlight Brewer based on her gender. It was about Brewer speaking to fellow Republican women at a conference. Brewer has garnered less media attention on the national level than Haley has so this may help explain why there are few stories about her. Either way there was little evidence of Brewer being covered in the media based solely on her gender.

Mary Fallin

Mary Fallin was first elected to be the governor of Oklahoma in 2010 and was the first woman in the state’s history to be governor. She is a Republican who has also served in the U.S. House and was Lieutenant Governors of Oklahoma from 1995-2007 and in the Oklahoma State House from 1990-1994 (CAWP Statewide Elective Executive Women Fact Sheet 2014). In the *Lexis-Nexis* search for Mary Fallin’s name 25 results were yielded. The search within those results for the term gender yielded 16 results. Of these 16 articles 6 of them discuss the role of gender in Fallin’s political career. One article focused on Fallin’s run for Congress because she was only the second woman to represent the state in the U.S. House of Representatives (Curits 2006). An article from *The Oklahoman* in 2007 which highlights Fallin being the second woman to be elected to Congress from Oklahoma references the role of Fallin’s gender and states that, “Mary Fallin rarely brings it up herself. She doesn’t have to draw attention to it because everybody else does” (Casteel). Fallin is also praised for paving the way for women in more than one instance in her political career because she was also the first woman in Oklahoma to be lieutenant governor. Fallin is quotes in the article as saying, “As a woman I have to earn respect, I have to prove myself” and discusses how some people expressed concern about her gender during her campaign for Congress. Gender was also a topic during Fallin’s run for governor, but this time because she was running against another woman (Brinkman 2011).

Most of the coverage of Mary Fallin that discusses her gender is positive in nature. A 2011 article from *The Oklahoman* asked if Fallin would be as good a governor as her male predecessor. The article argues that Fallin had proved herself in other ways during her campaign for governor and that, “[h]er impact on history…will come from her governance, not her gender.” The same newspaper also interviewed Fallin in 2008, before she was governor, and the topic of gender came up again. The article asked Fallin if she thinks her viewpoints differ based solely on her gender. She responded by saying, “When I first entered politics in 1990, I had the impression that women were stereotyped to be more interested in certain subjects over others - for instance, education, or children or social issues… I think women these days have broader interests in subjects and issues.” All of the previous articles above discussed Fallin’s gender in a positive way. She made history in more than one instance but one article from her 2010 gubernatorial campaign did concentrate on Fallin being criticized for the way she discussed gender in her campaign. Fallin had previously stated that her experience as a wife and mother set her apart from her opponent who has no children and was never married. The article explains how Fallin faced criticism for her comments (Hoberock 2010).

Maggie Hassan

Maggie Hassan is the only Democrat of the 5 current female governors. Before she began her term as governor of New Hampshire in 2012 she served in the state senate from 2004-2010 where she was the majority leader in 2010. The initial *Lexis-Nexis* search for Maggie Hassan had over 1,000 results and the search for gender within those results had 14 results. 11 of those 14 results dealt with the issue of gender. Like Jan Brewer of Arizona, Maggie Hassan is not the first women to be governor of her state, although she is only the second to do so. Hassan garnered some positive attention for breaking down barriers for women in politics but some of the articles reveal some criticism pointed at Hassan that deal with gender. A 2014 article from *The Union Leader* discussed Hassan’s support for a program called “Building Pathways” which is an apprentice program to encourage women to enter union construction careers (Montgomery). The article cites Hassan as saying that she knows what it is like to take untraditional paths and that she encourages other women to do the same. Others quoted in the article praised Hassan for her vision for women in the state and the country.

2 articles from 2014 praise Hassan for signing a bill that prevents wage discrimination based on gender and another from 2012 highlights how the organization EMILY’s List helped Hassan win her gubernatorial race. The 2012 article from *The Guardian* about the role EMILY’s List played in getting Hassan and other women elected was positive but another 2012 article on the topic discussed disapproval Hassan received for having an endorsement from the influential group (Haddadin). Another article from *The Union Leader* is about a committee of women that built support for Hassan during her run for governor. Many in the article are expressed support for Hassan and the policies she supports which advocate for women.

Another article from *The New York Times* in 2014 listed Hassan as a potential vice presidential candidate in the 2016 presidential election. The article discusses the possibility of a ticket with Hillary Clinton and another woman as vice president. While the article does not rule out the possibility it highlights a lot of concerns that have been expressed about 2 women on the same ticket. It outlines how some may express concerns about 2 women not being able to garner enough support together, and how Clinton running for president may stop other women from being able to be the vice presidential nominee. Another article involves Bill Clinton endorsing Hassan for governor. It is highly critical of Clinton endorsing Hassan because of his previous transgressions. It is actually more critical of Clinton, calling him a womanizer and “liar-in-chief”, than Hassan but condemns her for having Clinton endorse her campaign by asking what woman would want him to be associated with her campaign.

Susana Martinez

Susana Martinez, a Republican, was elected to be Governor of New Mexico in 2010. Before she was elected she was the Dona Ana County District Attorney from 1996-2009. Like Haley and Fallin, Martinez is the first female governor of her state and she is also the first ever Latina Governor in the United States (Simonich 2010). Over 1,000 results for Susana Martinez came up on the *Lexis-Nexis* search of newspapers done for her name. When the search for the term gender was done within those results 14 came up, and 8 of those 14 discuss the issue of gender. Much of what is written about Martinez focuses on her trailblazing as the first female and Latina governor of her state but others discuss some of her other attributes. One article discusses how many people call her bossy. The article is titled, “Bossy El Paso girl a born leader” and quotes her grandmother as calling Martinez “the little lawyer” and quotes her older brother for saying Martinez was always bossing the other kids around and getting them to do things her way (Renteria 2010).

Several of the articles which mention Martinez do so in the context of her as a potential vice presidential candidate. One of the articles discusses Martinez and Mary Fallin as viable and potential Republican candidates for president in 2016. The article argues that the women would be good candidates because of the leadership they have displayed as governor and their fiscal policies but also because of the fact that they are women. With Hillary Clinton as a potential presidential nominee the article posits that these women would be able to compete at her level (*Deming Headlight* 2014). Another article from 2011 also listed Hassan among a list of potential vice presidential candidates for the 2012 election, which also included Nikki Haley of South Carolina. Haley and Hassan are deemed great potential candidates because of their ethnic and gender diversity (Carpenter 2011). A *Washington Post* article from 2010 states that Martinez is among the list of potential candidates because of her diversity and her gender. Naming potential candidates like Martinez is a way for Republicans to elevate female candidates, something they had struggled to do up to that point (Cillizzia). An opinion article from *Ruidoso News* in 2012 argued that Martinez is an appealing candidate because, “For some Republicans, the "demographics" of a Martinez-for-vice-president…were alluring-she's a woman and she's Hispanic, two voting groups with which the GOP has a somewhat dicey record.” Just as Fallin did in one the articles about her Martinez is cited as downplaying her gender and her racial heritage saying focus on her performance as governor is more important than any other of her attributes (Alba 2011).

Control Group Results

Results for Vincent Sheheen and Terry Goddard, the male opponents of Nikki Haley and Janet Brewer, generally demonstrate that articles about them focus on their policies or their criticism of their opponent’s policies. Searches for their respective names plus the term gender did not yield any results and the criticism Sheheen and Goddard offered their opponents was focused solely on the policies and positions of Haley and Brewer. The coverage of the male candidates is comparable to their female counterparts which can suggest that male and female candidates receive the same levels of attention in the media in these instances. Mary Fallin’s opponent is not included in this control group because she is also a woman. Maggie Hassan and Susana Martinez’s opponents, Walt Havenstein and Gary King, yielded similar results. Both candidates had articles written about them that were critical of their policies or other parts of their campaigns such as financial contributions or their endorsements. One difference between the men and women is that the majority of stories about the male candidates focus on their time campaigning for governor while the women have stories written about them that focus on a wider variety of topics.

Discussion/Conclusion

This study is certainly limited in its ability to make general assertions about how female candidates are portrayed in the media but it is clear that, to some extent, women received media attention that focuses solely on their gender which distinguishes them for the coverage of their male counterparts. While much of the literature about gender differences in media coverage of politicians suggests that media coverage of women tends to be more negative when compared to the coverage of men this study found that several of the stories written about the five current female governors focus on their gender in a positive way. Certainly these women are also subject to some gendered stereotyping as evidenced in the sexist comments made about Nikki Haley in newspaper article written about her. This is a small study when compared to other content analyses of media coverage of female candidates but it does demonstrate that female politicians can gain attention solely because of their gender, but that attention can be either positive or negative in nature. The fact that the many of the articles that discussed negative stereotyping are critical of it may suggest that the coverage of female candidates is changing. These women may receive different attention from the media because they governor at the subnational level but it is clear that all of the women receive just as much media attention at their male counterparts.

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