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# 2009 GENDER IN THE WORKPLACE RESEARCH INITIATIVE

## Inconceivable construction: A Woman AND a Politician
### *Examining Discourses of Female Opinion-Makers*
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### OVERVIEW OF PROBLEM/ ISSUE

The most prominent female presidential candidates to-date have been Hillary Rodham Clinton (D) and Elizabeth Dole (R). In addition, two female vice-presidential candidates made history by appearing on the major party tickets: Sarah Palin (R) and Geraldine Ferraro (D). While none of them ended up winning, they are trailblazers in the history of American politics and in the history of American women.

During their respective campaigns, each of these four women's unique characteristics and qualifications were subject to intense public scrutiny. Throughout the extensive media coverage they received, these political candidates were prominently framed as "female" in addition to "politician" and/or "leader". This study investigates the question – How might these patterns of marking (or framing) feminine characteristics create an unachievable set of standards for women politicians?

### RESEARCH DESIGN

Using this idea of framing our group developed a series of research questions:
1. How were each of these political candidates uniquely marked as feminine or female?
2. How are each of these candidates framed as politicians? What characteristics are necessary for being a successful US politician?
3. What are the similarities or differences in how each of these women is marked? Historical, Ticket Position, and Political Party Comparisons
4. How might these patterns of marking femininity by opinion makers in major media outlets detract readers from the candidates' professional qualifications to be President/Vice President?
5. Do these patterns of female frames in the media coverage create a different set of standards or criteria for female politicians?

Based on our daily readership of newspapers and other media outlets during the 2008 primaries and presidential elections, our group formed two hypotheses:
1. Female or feminine characterization found in media coverage produces an inauthentic identity that conflicts with the qualifications and characteristics of successful U.S. politicians.
2. Use of feminine frames will decrease over time as female politicians become more commonplace.

To test our hypothesis and answer our research questions, we looked at language used by opinion makers to describe (or criticize) the qualifications of each candidate in four major news publications: *New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today,* and *Newsweek.* Editorials and opinion pieces appearing in the first two

months of these four candidates' campaigns were analyzed, with the exception of Dole, whose coverage was extended to ensure an equally sized data set. Additionally, our study looked exclusively at the work of female opinion writers. Previous research demonstrates that journalistic style between male and female writers does not differ when describing female candidates. Building on this, we wanted to examine how female writers frame top candidates according to political attributes (experience, rhetoric, platform issues, leadership skills) verses superfluous gender identification (visual appearance, sound of voice, emotional traits).

Our methodology involved two phases: 1) Compiling relevant content, and 2) Coding the language. First, we compiled female-authored opinion pieces for each of the candidates using Lexis-Nexis (timeframe and publication parameters stated above). The compiled data set for each candidate was assigned to a researcher to review and highlight language that framed the candidate's character or identity. Second, we created a coding sheet based on our research questions and literature review. The relevant excerpts (across publications) were then compiled into one coding sheet for each candidate. This data set was then analyzed further by two researchers (a primary and secondary coder) who independently coded female identity markers, qualification markers (leadership, experience, authenticity) and comparative markers (candidate compared to running mates, opponents, or other people). By reading multiple articles penned by various opinion makers from top news publications, we unearthed trends and variations in how women in the media characterize female political candidates.

## *FINDINGS*

Our research findings verify our first hypothesis, but contradict the second.  We upheld/disproved these hypotheses by answering our initial research questions:

1. How were each of these political candidates uniquely marked as feminine or female?
   a. All candidates were marked by feminine characteristics. However, these feminine characteristics were not always positive.  For example Sen. Hillary Clinton was described as "shrill" or "nagging" compared to Gov. Sarah Palin described as "sexy".  In addition Ferraro was much less marked by her femininity than the other three candidates (28% compared to +40%)

2. How are each of these candidates framed as politicians? What characteristics are necessary for being a successful US politician?
   a. In terms of characterizing the candidates' political attributes, opinion writers describe all four candidates using descriptors including (but not limited to) intelligence, confidence, and toughness. This language, in some cases, contradicts traditional characterizations of the female identity, which may affect the public's overall impression of the candidate.

3. What are the similarities or differences in how each of these women is marked?
   a. Historical – Ferraro had the lowest instance of gender markers (28%) whereas Dole, Clinton, and Palin were relatively equal (42%, 46%, 42% respectively)
   b. Ticket Position – Presidential hopefuls Dole and Clinton were compared to their husbands qualifications (27% Dole / 30% Clinton), whereas Ferraro and Palin were more often compared to "average working moms" (13% Ferraro / 16% Palin).
   c. Political Party – Dole and Palin (Republican candidates) were more often described as "token" candidates (40% Dole / 32% Palin). This may imply that they were selected for the presidential ticket because of their gender as much as their qualifications.  In addition, Dole and Palin were more frequently described using visual markers (20% Dole / 28% Palin). Ferraro and Clinton (Democratic candidates) were framed as "token" candidates less

frequently (approximately 24% for both). They also received lower visual characterizations (15% Ferraro / 9% Clinton).

4. How might these patterns of marking femininity by opinion makers in major media outlets detract from the candidates' qualifications to be President/Vice President?
   a. Across the board, these candidates were listed as inauthentic (with Dole scoring the highest at 20%). In terms of authenticity, Clinton scored the highest with only 10%.

5. Do these patterns of female markedness in the media coverage create a different set of standards or criteria for female politicians?
   a. This research was not measured because our group did not end up researching male counterparts to establish a "different than" qualifier. This may be an area for future research.

In summary, female opinion writers tend to focus on aspects of femininity, and this trend may contradict the language used to describe their political qualifications. Feminine markers include comparison to spouses' accomplishments; tokenism and visual appearance; and their role as a domestic professional or "working mom/spouse." In addition, all of the candidates were rarely described as "authentic" (less than 10%) and often described as inauthentic or unnatural (as high as 20% for some candidates). The candidates were also described using adjectives not commonly associated with the traditional female identity, which may strengthen the female candidates' political personas but also provide a contradictory message to the public.

Given these findings we verified that our first hypothesis was correct: Female or feminine characterization found in media coverage produces an inauthentic identity that conflicts with the qualifications and characteristics of successful U.S. politicians. However, because Ferraro had significantly less coverage of her gender as the focus in opinion pieces of her candidacy, it disproved our second hypothesis: Subtle comments focusing on feminine frames have not decreased over time.

### *IMPLICATIONS*

Ultimately none of the women candidates were successful in winning their campaigns. The language used by female writers in the media seem to produce a conflicting identity for each of these candidates – character frames which touted (or diminished) their femininity but also exemplified traditional political traits (masculine markers of strength, intelligence, power). Our findings support the viewpoint that media coverage may negatively impact the credibility of female candidates who run for higher office.

### *FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS/ IDEAS*

Use of the Internet – How does citizen journalism impact the idea of who is an opinion maker? How does the blogosphere impact overall perceptions of candidates' authenticity? Note: This study limited research to traditional news publications because of historical comparisons (Ferraro and Dole received little to no on-line coverage)

Party Divisions – There are obvious differences in markers of identity based on party lines. Does this stem from opinion-makers' (liberal media) bias to the party OR because of language and attitudes stemming from inside the party?

Ferraro coverage – Ferraro seemed to have significantly less coverage with regard to her gender than the other three candidates. We believe that this is due to one, the novice nature of a female candidate running for office and two, limited number of female writers to analyze.