

**As Seen on TV:
Gendered Television News Coverage of the
2004 Congressional Election**

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to my mother for her selfless dedication to my education. Thank you for ensuring I got here and encouraging me along the way. I would also like to thank my advisors, Professor Barakso and Professor Schaffner, for their constant support, patience and understanding in guiding me through this process and directing me through roadblocks.

ABSTRACT

In past studies, researchers have found that newspaper coverage of male and female political candidates differs in both quantity and substance. As women's numbers increase in Congress and people increasingly turn to television news for election information, an update on these studies is necessary. Local television news coverage for the 2004 election to the House of Representatives was analyzed in order to explore the extent to which gender differences in quantity of coverage, issues covered and story tone persist. The results indicate that female candidates received less coverage overall and when they were covered, there was less focus on substantive issues and they were more likely to be covered in a story with a negative tone, as compared to male candidates. Differences in media coverage may negatively affect female candidate's electoral success and discourage other females from running, contributing to the underrepresentation of females in political office.

Research conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s indicated that there are systematic differences in news media coverage of male and female political candidates which may affect electoral outcomes (Kahn, 1994; 1992; Leeper, 1991). Following “The Year of the Woman” in 1992 however, when women’s numbers nearly doubled in Congress, scholars found that women candidates were receiving more equal news coverage (Smith, 1997, Devitt, 1999). Over a decade later, and outside the spotlight of “The Year of the Woman”, do gendered differences in coverage still persist? In this paper I ask: to what extent was local television news coverage of the 2004 election for the House of Representatives different for male and female candidates?

Although the number of women holding political office has increased in the past decades, women are still disproportionately under represented at all levels of government in the United States. Previous research on gender bias in the media indicates that when women ran for office in the 1980s they were depicted by the media as less viable, as focusing on “women’s issues” and their coverage had a more negative tone than male candidate coverage (Kahn, 1994; 1992; Leeper, 1991). The news media play an important role in informing voters about candidates, because in most elections the voters do not have a chance to interact with candidates personally. If the media covers politicians stereotypically, then the information that voters collect about each candidate might be based on these stereotypes and may hinder a female candidate’s electoral success.

Although the studies conducted by Kahn (1994; 1992) and Leeper were replicated across a number of election cycles at varying levels of political office, most were performed prior to 1992, when the number of women in the House of Representatives nearly doubled in a single election. In the past decade new research has established that women candidates for open seats are as likely as male candidates to win (Newman and Leighton, 1997), which could support the notion that the media bias found in research no longer persists. As the political landscape shifts and women are better represented in Congress and more likely to win elections, it is necessary to update previous research.

Previous studies of gendered campaign coverage only analyzed newspaper coverage. There has not yet been a study that investigates gendered media bias in television news coverage of congressional elections which is problematic because voters use television news to supply themselves with election information, educate themselves about the candidates and inform their candidate evaluations. A March 2008 Harris Poll found that 70% of Americans' surveyed used the local television news as their major source of political news (Harris Interactive, 2008). Not only is television the most frequently consulted media source, it is also perceived to be the most credible source by 53% of Americans, even when it conflicted with other sources of information, including newspapers (Price and Wulff, 2005). As more Americans turn to television news to receive information about candidates, that coverage is important to investigate for gender differences.

In this paper I assess whether unequal coverage of female candidates continues to persist in recent elections by analyzing news coverage of the 2004 elections for the House of Representatives. In the next section I will describe relevant research concerning women as candidates for political office, journalistic practices in story selection, past findings on gendered media coverage and the overall implications of gendered news coverage. I then describe the methods by which I analyze candidate coverage in order to determine if male and female candidates continue to receive different treatment, both in quantity and substance. Finally, I discuss the results of the study and their implications.

Women in Congress

Why might it matter how women are portrayed in local television news media? One important reason is that women are significantly underrepresented in Congress. Currently, women comprise only 16% of the membership of the House of Representatives.¹ This is a 10% gain in the percentage of seats women held when past researchers conducted analyses of campaign coverage (Kahn, 1991; Sapiro 1992). The increase in the percentage of women in Congress over the past two decades is depicted in Figure 1. Although there has been a steady increase in women's representation within the House of Representatives, congresswomen still have not reached representational parity, assuming that females comprise approximately half of the population.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

¹ According to Rutgers University, Center for American Women and Politics, Women Officeholders Fact Sheet, Accessed online at <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/Facts.html#congress> November, 2007.

Low representation is problematic because scholars argue it is necessary for women legislators to reach parity in order to participate more effectively in politics. When women's representation increases they will be better able to represent the views of women to a male dominated congress, bring "women's issues" to the agenda and serve as role models to encourage more women to participate (Mansbridge, 1999). Scholars have found that congresswomen were more likely to advocate for traditional "women's issues" such as abortion than congressmen and were taken more seriously as they were believed to have "the moral high ground" on these "women's issues" (Dolan, Deckman and Swers, 2007). This difference in legislative styles may mean that if more women were elected to Congress there could be a substantive change that would likely be in the best interest of women. In addition, a more representative Congress may change gendered norms surrounding political participation that discourage girls from seeking office. It has also been suggested by scholars that increased representation leads to increased belief in the responsiveness of the government to one's needs (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006). The absence of equal numbers of women in political office may increase dissatisfaction with government institutions.

A number of explanations exist as to why women are underrepresented in Congress and many of them can be related to gendered news coverage. Some scholars argue that women candidates are discriminated against, or believed to be inferior, by other candidates, voters and the media (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993). They argue that overt sexism exists that disadvantages female candidates. This sexism exists within the media (Kahn, 1997), within party nomination processes (Niven, 1998) and within voter decision making (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993). Any gendered difference in coverage would provide partial support for the belief that women are underrepresented due to discrimination by the media as the media portrays them stereotypically or as less viable candidates.

Another explanation is that women are socialized differently and therefore do not follow the career path of politics, so they never seek candidacy. Under this assumption, women are simply uninterested in becoming candidates or involving themselves in politics (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006). One of the reasons they may not seek candidacy is because they believe that the institutions are biased against them (Lawless and Fox, 2004) or they are socialized against politics so they do not follow the career paths that filter in to political office (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006). Media coverage that is overtly biased against female candidates or does not feature female candidate's as prominently may discourage other women from running and confirm gendered beliefs that politics is a male dominated field.

Another possible explanation is *institutional inertia* which relies on evidence of an incumbency advantage and slow turnover of elected officials in Congress (Dolan, Deckman and Swers, 2007). This theory explains the lack of women in office as an effect of their having only recently entered the political arena and therefore not enjoying the incumbency advantage at the same level as male legislators. This argument would be supported if women candidates are treated the same as male candidates in elections for open seats and female incumbents receive the same coverage as male incumbents.

Election Coverage

As most voters never come in to direct contact with political candidates, they often must learn about the candidates and their positions through the news media (Dolan, 2004). Because local television news is the main source of information for most voters, how they choose to portray the candidates is very significant to a candidate's potential electoral success. Candidates' campaign staffs realize the importance of their candidate's portrayal in the media. Television news is especially important as it is the main source of news for most Americans (Robinson and Levy, 1986). Gendered coverage is possible because, as Kahn (1994) made clear, television news is not a "mirror" of everything that happens politically but rather a selection of what news people decide to select and cover.

The media influences elections through information acquisition, persuasion, agenda-setting and priming (Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar, 1991). Studies have been conducted that confirm that the media can effectively change public opinion, even in elections (Kahn, 1996). The media also dictates what issues its viewers and readers will treat as most important through “agenda-setting”. Most significant to this study is the media’s “priming” role or the ability of the media to prime individuals, through concentration on certain issues, to believe that the selected issue is the public official’s most important issue (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). For example, if the media reports only on “women’s issues” in connection to a female candidate, the public is lead to believe that those are the issues most important to that candidate and the candidate does not have a strong position on other issues.

As a journalist is not an unbiased, objective participant in the campaign, their biases might come out in their coverage of candidates. As their resources to cover campaigns are limited, journalists must consider newsworthiness and audience interest when selecting which stories to cover. In addition, studies have shown that reporters bring prior expectations and personal values into account when selecting stories (Clarke and Evans 1983). Reporters are products of the society and therefore bring common gender stereotypes and beliefs to the stories that they cover. Television news is further constrained by the need for effective video and sound bites in presenting a story, which prioritizes stories with good video over news stories of substance, decreasing the prevalence of issue coverage (Kaniss, 1991).

In addition, television news is not solely about informing viewers about the positions of candidates in an objective manner, but is also a profit making endeavor (Kaniss, 1991).

Television stations produce local news segments because they are inexpensive and attract advertising revenue. Because of this emphasis on profit, television news is subject to competition and therefore is designed to appeal to the mass audience, rather than the educated demographic that newspapers target. Due to this emphasis on attracting a wide audience, trait coverage and news stories about campaign strategy dominate coverage over policy issues, as these conflict or personalization frames have been proven to be more appealing to audiences (Kaniss, 1991).

According to Clarke and Evans (1983), “reporters bring tricks of the trade, proven ways for gathering news, to their political assignments” and this may affect the stories they choose to cover and the manner in which they cover the, leading to a potential gender bias. In addition, the media’s coverage of Congress is minimal, especially in presidential election years, as it takes a backseat to the presidential election coverage. Coverage of congressional elections also depends on the district, including the size of the district and how many news outlets are covering a particular election. Many journalists rely on interviews with campaign managers to get information about a particular candidate, so much of what is covered by the media is indirectly controlled by the candidate’s themselves (Clarke and Evans, 27). Candidates also have opportunities to appear in local television news studios for in studio interviews or free air time spots to provide viewers with more information. Television reporters also acquire information from press releases, newspaper stories, viewer tips and wire service (Kaniss, 1991).

Gendered Campaign Coverage

Previous research on gendered newspaper coverage of political campaigns has found that coverage of female candidates is different than that of male candidates and often in a manner that is perceived as disadvantageous to female candidates' electoral success (Bystrom, 2001; Devitt, 1999; Kahn, 1994, 1992; Leeper, 1991; Smith, 1997). Results indicated that the media was biased against women by not covering a candidate at all, delegitimizing female candidates' electoral viability or covering them in a negative tone (Fox, 1997). Past studies have also found that women candidates receive less coverage and the coverage they do receive focuses on personal issues such as their marriage and family life, "women's issues" such as healthcare and poverty, female traits such as compassion, and the "horserace" frame more often than male coverage does (Kahn, 1992, 1994).

Amount of Coverage

Previous research (Kahn, 1997) has found that races with women candidates receive less overall coverage than races with two male candidates. This is significant because scholarship shows that in order for a candidate to be well recognized and therefore receive votes, they must be featured in the media (Mann and Wolfinger, 1980; Goldenberg and Traugott, 1984). Kahn (1991) posited that because there were few female candidates for political office, they should have been perceived as more "news worthy" and, accordingly, received more overall coverage. The "standards of newsworthiness" are one of the models used by reporters to select stories to cover based on a number of criteria, including novelty, that have been proven effective in attracting an audience (Kahn, 1994). Her results indicated that these standards and practices did not result in increased coverage for female candidates.

Kahn also pointed out that if the media does not see a candidate as ‘viable’ or an election as contested, they will be less inclined to focus time on their race, instead highlighting the likely winner. In her content analysis of newspaper articles, Kahn found that the decreased amount of news coverage that female candidates received was consistent across races regardless of the level of competition and size of the newspapers (1991). Studies performed by Smith (1997) and Devitt (1999) on senatorial and gubernatorial elections of 1994 and 1996 found that the difference in amount of coverage found by Kahn had decreased following 1992 (“Year of the Woman”). They hypothesized that following women’s rapid increase in to Congress in 1992, women candidates were seen as both newsworthy and viable.

Frame of Coverage

The media employs frames, a system that directs the focus of a story in a simplified and commonly used manner, in order to provide organization for otherwise complex events (Norris, 1997). Some possible frames that are prevalent in election coverage include the “horserace”, strategy, personal issues, ad watch and issues coverage. The “horserace” and ad watch frames cover the campaign and how the candidates are campaigning, including where they stand in the polls, how much money they have raised, how they are spending their money, what tactics they are using and which voters they are targeting (Kaplan, Goldstein and Hale, 2005). These strategy based frames rarely discuss the substantive issues of the campaign or provide insights on the real differences between candidates. The issues and personal characteristics frame focus on the candidates’ stances on policy issues or personal characteristics of the candidates, respectively. According to a study by Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn (2004), the “horserace” frame and “candidates as people”, or personal characteristics frame, are the strongest at attracting viewers (174).

The media's preference for a conflict frame due to the marketability of conflict stories results in their framing of elections as a "horserace", stressing the competitive nature of the election as the primary focus of the story rather than substantive issues. The practice of framing stories in this manner sometimes hurts female candidates who are viewed as less viable at the outset due to fewer resources or less name recognition (Dolan, Deckman and Swers, 2007). The "horserace" frame primes voters to concentrate more on candidate viability than issue importance (Kahn, 1991). In Kahn's study of Senatorial elections the "horserace" frame was utilized for 27% of articles about female candidates and only 21% of articles about male candidates (1991). This is also problematic for female candidates because if they are more often discussed in terms of the "horserace" frame, it may suggest to voters that they do not have positions on policy issues.

In addition, media coverage of women, according to past studies, has focused on their personal issues rather than policy issues, stressing appearance, personality, marriage and family status of female candidates. This type of coverage serves to reinforce female stereotypes and make women candidates look less serious as contenders for political office. When voters are not given information related to a woman candidate's policy positions the voter may assume that the candidate does not have substantive policy goals (Hall, 1995). Kahn's study also confirmed this lack of issue coverage and she speculates this is a result of journalist's belief that women are less competent on the issues and therefore their stances on issues are less newsworthy (1997). In addition, scholars have found that voters are more likely to remember facts about a female candidate's personal characteristics, such as her family life or appearance, whereas they are more likely to remember facts about a male candidate's campaign activities, suggesting that the media may be playing to voter preferences (Hitchon and Chang 1995).

Masculine v. Feminine Issue Coverage

When policy issues are covered, the press often focuses on “women’s issues” in their coverage of female candidates, which include education, health care and abortion rights (Carroll and Schreiber, 1997). Reporters are less likely to discuss traditionally masculine issues such as national security and economics in connection to female candidates. As pointed out by Dolan, Deckman and Swers in their analysis of gendered media coverage, “when the media neglect to interview women leaders about political issues...such as national security or international affairs...they perpetuate the notion that most of politics remains a male bastion, undermining the credibility of women” (Dolan, Deckman and Swers, 2007). Gendered discrimination was also found in the candidate traits that the media chose to cover, describing women as compassionate and honest while men were more likely to be referred to as leaders and experts.

Media discrimination can either help or hinder a woman's electoral success depending on the election context. In 1992, scholars argued that the media's focus on female candidates' stances on "women's issues" and feminine traits was beneficial to female candidates because voters wanted honesty and compassion at that time (Kahn, 1997). Scholars speculate that the 2004 election was unique because voters were focused on war, so the issue of national security was important and female candidates are stereotyped as being less competent in handling these issues (Dolan, Deckman and Swers, 2007). The level of issue salience, or the issues that become "voting issues" in a particular election make it so female candidates must overcome policy-related disadvantage in these elections (Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler, 1998). According to a study conducted by Lawless (2004), voters consider male candidates to be "superior at addressing the new obstacles generated by the events of September 11, 2001" due to their perceived competency in traditional "masculine issues" such as national security (479). If women candidates' coverage concentrates on "women's issues" and male candidates' coverage focuses on national security issues during the election, it may help support the hypothesis of a negative effect of stereotypes.

The appropriations of gendered positions on policy issues and traits by the media to candidates may not be entirely the fault of the media. Research indicates that voters assign gendered characteristics to candidates regardless of what the candidate's actual stances on policies are. Women candidates are perceived to be more compassionate and competent on handling poverty, education and health policy while male candidates are perceived to be more instrumental and competent on handling military and economic issues. Male and female candidates alike appeal to voter preference for gendered attributes by intentionally appearing in a certain manner (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993).

In low information elections, including congressional elections which receive little coverage, gender can be an indicator of how liberal or conservative a candidate might act when in office. Voters might have a “baseline gender preference” which correlates to their political ideology which they utilize to make electoral decisions. Because of this “baseline gender preference” conservative women may need to try harder to convey their ideology while liberal men may focus on “women’s issues” to convey their positions (Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Studies show that women legislators do act differently once elected to Congress in both legislative sponsorship and floor voting (Swers, 2002) which might also contribute to the stereotypes of women cited above. If voters already hold stereotypes about women candidates and women play to these stereotypes, this may also result in gender difference in news media coverage.

Research indicates that both male and female candidates intentionally play to gender stereotypes in an attempt to utilize these stereotypes to their advantage and garner more of the electorate's vote. Difference in coverage is at least in part a product of candidate manipulation rather than purely media bias, especially with local news as the reporters have few resources to seek out stories and instead rely on reports from campaign managers and candidates to get news (Iyengar, Valentino, Ansolabehere and Simon, 1997). In addition, studies have found that candidates have developed strategies to control their media appearance, "priming" audiences to perceive them in a certain way (Dolan, Deckman and Swers, 2007). A study that analyzed the campaign slogans of candidates for the 2002 Senate found that women were more likely to use the words "values" and "families" than male candidates, emphasizing their stereotypically female qualities (Dolan, Deckman and Swers, 2007). Therefore, there are two hypotheses that emerge about how female candidates utilize communications: they either reinforce or compensate for gender-based stereotypes (Fox, 1997). The approach that female candidates use may depend on which issues are salient to voters in a particular election year.

Although literature indicates that candidates play to gendered stereotypes by focusing on traditionally “women issues” in order to attract female voters (Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003), recent evidence suggests that in “new media”, such as candidate websites, candidates are not running gendered campaigns. An analysis of candidate websites in the 2000 and 2002 congressional campaigns revealed that there was not a significant difference between male and female candidates’ websites in which policy issues they featured most prominently as their “top issues” (Dolan, 2005). Female candidates’ aversion to running a gendered campaign in the 2000 and 2002 could stem from recent research that finds that if a woman candidate actively campaigns on “women’s issues”, voters tend to see them as ineffectual candidates only concerned with “women’s issues” (Larson, 2001). Female candidates may need to separate themselves from stressing these issues to be perceived as effective politicians.

Candidate party is also an important factor in determining what issues a candidate prioritizes. As most of the women who run and win congressional elections are Democrats, female candidates’ coverage would logically follow more traditionally Democratic issues which are also traditionally “women’s issues” and therefore analysis will have to take these party differences into account (Dolan, 2005). In addition, gender stereotypes affect Democratic and Republican women candidates differently. Gender stereotypes distance female Democrats from moderate voters and lead swing voters to vote for the Republican candidates, while gender stereotypes reduce the distance between female Republican candidates and moderates, effectively increasing their chances at electoral success (Koch, 2000). This may affect the way in which each party portrays their gender, and therefore must be taken in to account.

Tone of Story

In a study conducted by Fox (1997) that looked at campaign managers' interpretation of the media treatment of their candidates, the results indicated that managers for female candidates found the media to be biased ideologically against their candidates. The campaign managers blamed conservative media for the differences in treatment of their candidates. Campaign managers believed that the media portrayed women candidates as more liberal and believed that ideological bias was damaging to their candidate's electoral chances (Fox, 1997). Direct media bias through the tone or slant of the story has been difficult to determine in the past. According to a study conducted by Kim Kahn in 1994, female candidates were more likely to be portrayed as "sure losers" by the press, conveying that they were not viable and diminishing their chances at electoral success.

Gender of the Reporter

The gender of the reporter has also been related to gendered campaign coverage in past studies (Kahn, 1991). According to Kahn's study, female reporters were 8% more likely to discuss "women issues" than male reporters and covered female-male races 17% more often than male reporters (1991). Research indicates that women journalists are also more likely to cover women in the news than male journalists (Kahn, 1997). A content analysis of two weeks of local television news reported that female reporters were more likely to cover stories that are considered less substantive, such as human interest stories, than male reporters who are more likely to cover substantive issues such as politics, partially explaining the dearth of female reporters in political news content analyses (Danilewicz and Desmond, 2007). If women reporters are more likely to cover female candidates and more likely to cover less substantive stories, this may partially explain why female candidates receive less substantive policy issue coverage.

One of the key issues that scholars have cited in their explanation of gendered coverage is the dearth of female reporters and journalists in the media, leading to a male dominated field (Smith 1997). According to the “Gender and Minority Representation in Network News” report of 2002, women reporters accounted for only 29% of on-air reports, which is a rise from the past, but still not representative (Media Report, 2004). The Media Report study looked at national network news reporters, not local news reporters. Although there is not an exact figure, women reporters are actually more likely to be found at the local level than the national level, due to reduced travel and workload demands that allow them to accommodate family lives (Price and Wulff, 2005).

Limitations of Past Studies

Studies (Kahn, 1991, 1992, 1994) that found a gender bias in coverage were conducted prior to the first “year of the woman” in 1992, when the number of women in Congress rapidly increased, and therefore the conclusions that were drawn may no longer prove relevant. Kahn hypothesized that women were not treated as viable candidates because of their lack of representation. Following the 1992 “Year of the Woman” when the number of women in Congress nearly doubled, journalists began to discuss gender as an advantage to electoral success for women (Wilcox, 1994). Following women’s success in the 1992 election, studies revealed that women were as likely to win as men (Newman, 1994). This new perception of women as viable candidates might have affected coverage as depicted by an analysis of coverage of the 1992 and 1994 senatorial and gubernatorial races found no statistically significant difference in coverage (Smith, 1997). However, Bystrom, Robertson and Banwart analyzed the 2000 senatorial and gubernatorial elections and found that some of the differences in coverage cited by Kahn persisted, such as the focus on personal issues for female candidates, while other differences, such as a focus on female candidate’s physical characteristics, vanished (2001). Past studies also only analyzed newspaper coverage, which is not a prominent source of political news for many voters (Harris Interactive, 2008).

Although historically gendered differences in coverage have been interpreted as disadvantageous to women candidates, not all gendered coverage is necessarily negative. One study found that when more gendered information, or information about candidate sex, was made available by the media to the public, voters were more likely to elect a woman candidate (Herrnson, Lay and Stokes, 2003). Dolan explains this phenomenon by hypothesizing that “the amount of gendered information may well serve to help people make the connection between their own interests and the presence of women candidates” (Dolan, 2004). Research must be updated to reflect changes in the literature.

Implications of Biased Coverage

When women candidates run for Congress, if incumbency, political party and resources are controlled, they are as likely as their male counterparts to win elections (Seltzer, Newman and Leighton, 1997). A study performed by Seltzer, Newman and Leighton found that although women are less likely to be incumbents and open seats are limited, when an evaluation of all open seat elections is performed, women candidates won as often as men (1997). If women who run for political office are as likely as their male counterparts to win their elections, why does the difference in representation still exist?

Despite the fact that women win elections at the same rate as men, a key limiting factor is that they run for office in far lower numbers than men (Lawless and Fox, 2004). Women are less likely to run for office for a number of reasons including lack of encouragement and lack of perceived credentials for political office (Lawless and Fox, 2004; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). The media's unequal treatment of women might contribute to this dearth of potential candidates. There is evidence that finds that if "women believe that the system is unfairly biased against them it may have important consequences for the further participation of female candidates" (Fox, 1997). Another potential implication of unequal campaign coverage is the effect of coverage of a viable female candidate on adolescent women's political aspirations. When young women see viable women candidates featured prominently in the news media they are more likely to report that they have intentions to become politically active in the future (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006). If the solution to representational parity is encouraging more candidates to run, positive and evenly balanced portrayal of women candidates may be one method to encourage participation and increase electoral success.

In sum, there is an observable lack of women in political office in the United States. This could be a result of a number of factors, one of which could be a gendered bias of the media, which has been confirmed by a number of studies of the newspaper coverage of past elections. Women are as likely as men to win elections when they run so the real problem of under representation is a lack of female candidates. Journalists take their own biases into account when selecting which stories to cover and what frames to use, so this might result in gendered campaign coverage.

This study will address the questions as to whether there are differences between male and female candidates in the quantity, tone, issue coverage and gender of the reporter with reference to local television news coverage of the 2004 congressional election. I hypothesize that differences in newspaper coverage of male and female candidates found in previous studies of past elections will not persist in television news coverage of the 2004 election as women candidates are no longer a novelty and are as likely to win as male candidates.

METHODS

Selection of Elections

The election I have chosen to analyze is the 2004 election for the House of Representatives. I have chosen this because it contains a large sample of women candidates without being outdated so any coverage patterns detected would still prove relevant today. In addition, it is the only election that has all of the local news coverage in a retrievable, web-based archive. I analyzed elections for all House seats for which Lear Center Local News Archive has recorded the local news. The database contains all television news programming during the 5:00pm-11:30pm period between September 27 and November 2, 2004 that was displayed in 11 television markets, including: Dallas, Dayton, Denver, Des Moines, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Orlando, Philadelphia, Seattle and Tampa. The Lear Center archived all stories that had any mention of the 2004 election. A summary of the sample used is depicted in Figure 2. Of the 42 elections covered by the Lear Center, there were 18 female candidates and 58 male candidates. Some candidates whose elections were covered by the Lear Center did not receive any coverage. There are 6 Republican female candidates and 12 Democratic female candidates. There are 30 Republican male candidates, 24 Democratic male candidates and 4 third party male candidates.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Who a candidate is facing often dictates how a candidate runs their campaign. Male candidates are more likely to play to “women’s issues” if they are running against a woman while they mention “women’s issues” less when campaigning against a male (Dolan, 2005). In order to control for this difference I will examine races in which a) women run against women, b) women run against men and c) men run against men in order to ensure that any differences observed are not a result of male candidate’s compensation for perceived gender advantages. The 42 elections in my sample break down along gender lines as follows: a) 2 races are woman v. woman, 14 races are woman v. man and 26 races are man v. man. Although predominantly man v. man, there are a substantial number of woman v. man races in the sample. In the sample, 26 male candidates and 9 female candidates lost their elections and 32 male candidates and 9 female candidates won their elections. In order to determine if men were more competitive candidates, the percentage of votes each candidate received in their election was calculated and then averaged over all candidates of their gender. Male candidates averaged 51.4% of the overall vote while female candidates averaged 52.2% of the overall vote.

Lear Center Local News Archive

The data set comprised televisions news coverage archived at the Lear Center Local News Archive for the 2004 election. The Lear Center Local News Archive is a collection of televisions news campaign coverage of the 2004 election from 11 television markets in a retrievable, web based system. All stories pertaining to the elections in the sample size were viewed and information about the story focus (“horserace”, strategy, issues, ad watch, etc.), overall tone of story, length of story, issues covered and reporter gender recorded by Story Code. Stories that covered Katherine Harris’ automobile accident² were excluded from this study because they would not shed light on the issues being explored and may alter the data on variables such as story length.

The Lear Center, in addition to archiving the stories, also had independent coders analyze stories based on a number of criteria. One category that the Lear Center provides is the story focus which was described as strategy, issue, personal characteristics, ad watch, “horserace” and other. I recorded the Lear Center classification of which story focus each story was categorized to determine if the 2004 election was consistent with past media coverage studies that found that women candidates received less coverage focusing on issues.

² During a campaign event, a man, Barry Selzer, attempted to intimidate Katherine Harris and her supporters by veering his car on to the sidewalk that they were gathered on. This event and its aftermath were widely covered by local news stations (CNN).

The Lear Center also coded archived stories by overall tone, as follows: no overall tone, negative tone, positive tone and balanced tone (Kaplan, Goldstein and Hale, 2005). I also recorded these classifications, by Story Code. These classifications will help in determining whether there is direct gender discrimination through the use of negative tone. If so, it will be comparable with past studies that have found that coverage of women is generally more negative than that of males (Kahn, 1992). It is a useful tool especially since the raters who originally rated the stories were not researching gender differences, so my expectations regarding past research on gendered coverage will not affect my results.

The Lear Center also provides a number of quantity based measurements about each archived story. The researchers provide the length of time of each news story, the length of all candidate sound bites within a story and the percentage of the story that was devoted to the candidate. Based on the percentage of the story and the total story length, the length of time devoted to an individual candidate was calculated. I recorded each of the measures in order to determine if there were any differences in the quantity of coverage that male and female candidates received.

I then viewed each clip and recorded the two final dependent variables, the issues covered and the reporter gender. The first variable, issues covered, was coded by first recording the mention of a policy issue in the candidate coverage or candidate sound bite. The issues were then grouped in categories using Kim Kahn's division of traditionally "women's issues" and "men's issues". Kahn regarded foreign policy, defense, trade, agriculture and the economy to be traditionally "masculine issues" and social programs, education, healthcare, and the environment to be traditionally feminine issues. Any issues that did not fit in the gendered categories were ignored. Using Kahn's definitions is beneficial because by staying consistent with previous research, any differences found in this analysis will provide an indication as to whether coverage has changed since Kahn's original research in 1991, 1992 and 1994.

The final variable that was recorded was the gender of the anchor and reporter reporting the story. Research indicates that women journalists are more likely to cover women in the news than male journalists (Kahn, 1997). Women are still underrepresented in journalism. That may account for differences in coverage of female candidates if female reporters are the only reporters covering female candidates. In many cases candidates were covered in studio interviews or free air time spots, so there was no reporter involved.

RESULTS

All results in this section were calculated by taking the average of the variable over the total number of stories featuring male candidates for the “male” column and the average over the total number of stories featuring the female candidates for the “female” column. This was done to eliminate the possibility of a smaller sample of stories for female candidates affecting the overall results.

Quantity of Coverage

One of the measures most important to Kahn’s 1991 study was the quantity of coverage that a female candidate received as compared to a male candidate. Unlike in newspapers, where quantity was measured by line counts, on television it must be measured by the length (in seconds) of the story. Lear Center Local News Archive provided the length of the story, the percentage of each story that focused on a particular candidate and the length of candidate sound bites within a story.

The length of the story, overall, differed between male and female candidates, with male candidates receiving an average of 118 seconds and female candidates receiving an average 109 seconds. These differences persisted even when incumbency was isolated, with male incumbents receiving more time than female incumbents and male challengers receiving more time than female challengers, as depicted in Figure 3.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The average length of candidate sound bites showed similar discrepancies between male and female candidates. The average length of male candidate's sound bites were 29 seconds and female candidate's sound bites were 26 seconds, a 3 second overall difference in time between male and female candidates overall, across all stories. The Lear Center archive also recorded approximately what percentage of a story focused on a particular candidate. There classifications were not precise measurements based on the exact time expended on each candidate but instead an estimate, with numbers ranging from 95% of the story to only 5% of the story. With those numbers, approximately how many seconds of each story specifically pertained to a particular candidate was calculated. In this measure, male candidates received more coverage than female candidates again, receiving an average of 57 seconds per story while female candidates received only 54 seconds per story.

When the stories were analyzed for quantity differences based on the incumbency of the candidates, differences persisted, and in the case of challenger candidates, the discrepancy between time devoted to male candidates and time devoted female candidates increased. Female challengers received approximately 11 seconds less, on average, than male challengers. Female incumbents also received slightly less coverage than male incumbents, as depicted in Figure 3. As discussed above, the quantity of coverage is important to a candidate in developing name recognition and educating voters about policy positions. If women, regardless of incumbency, are receiving less coverage overall and fewer sound bites, they may suffer electorally. Less coverage may also lead voters to believe that female candidates are less viable. In all categories of quantity of coverage, female candidates received less coverage than male candidates.

Overall Tone

The reported tone was operationalized by the Lear Center as the “tone” or slant of a particular news story, as either: no tone, negative tone, balanced tone or positive tone. The tone of the story is important because if there is a negative spin to the story, it may delegitimize the candidate and lead viewers to question their electoral viability, or reveal a stereotype held by the reporter regarding a woman candidate. When this variable was analyzed against the gender of the candidate, 16.7% of female stories were negative and only 10.5% of male stories were negative. In addition, 13.4% of stories that featured male candidates were rated as positive while only 8.3% of stories featuring female candidates were positive. The results are depicted in Figure 4.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

These gender differences remained consistent across incumbent and challenger candidates, by gender. It appears that female candidates are more likely to be covered in stories with a negative tone and male candidates are more likely to be covered in stories with a balanced or positive tone. An example of a story with a negative tone was the coverage of the race for the thirteenth district in Florida, between Katherine Harris and Jan Schneider, in which the campaign was described as a “bitter rematch” between two women “hiding between negative attack ads” (Lear Center, 2004-Tampa-FOX-306-35-01). **This race was also described as one of “few races featuring woman against woman”. The race between Stan Matsunaka and Marilyn Musgrave was also described as a “bitter” race by the local television news affiliate (Lear Center, 2004-Denver-NBC-305-46-08).** Female candidates were **subject to this type of coverage more often than male candidates.**

Gender of the Reporter

The gender of the news anchor and news reporter was also recorded. In both the anchor and reporter variable, there were far more male than female news people represented overall. With reference to the gender of the anchor, there were not large differences, but the data indicates that male anchors were more likely to cover both male and female candidates. With reference to the gender of the reporter, male reporters were more likely to cover male candidates and female reporters were slightly more likely to cover female candidates. Many local news election stories were not covered by a reporter at all, and instead only discussed by a news anchor. The rate at which reporters covered each gender of candidate is depicted in Figure 5.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

The gender of the reporter covering a candidate is an important variable due to the status of female reporters within the media. There are significantly fewer female reporters than male reporters and some research indicated, as discussed above, that when women are reporters they are generally less experienced and cover less substantial stories. From this data that show that female candidates are far more likely to be covered by a female reporter than their male peers, it can be inferred that female reporters are intentionally assigned to these stories which might indicate that stories about female candidates are viewed by executives as less substantial or newsworthy. In addition, if female candidates are being covered by female reporters and there are fewer female reporters, that predicts a reduced chance for female candidates to get news time, which leads to a lack of name recognition as discussed above with reference to quantity of coverage.

Primary Focus of the Story/Story Frame

Another variable recorded by the Lear Center Local News Archive was the frame, or primary focus, of the news story. The categories for story primary focus included: strategy, issues, personal characteristics, adwatch, “horserace” and “other”. The primary focus of the story varied by the gender of the candidate, although only slightly. Female candidates were featured in more stories with the strategy frame than the “issues” frame, while male candidates were featured more often from the “issues” frame over the “strategy” frame. Overall, the stories were more likely to be presented by the “issues” frame, which might be a result of a larger percentage of stories featuring male candidates. Almost all of the stories focused on the strategy or issues of the candidates, so no clear pattern emerged in the other story frames. The primary focus of the news stories, by candidate gender, is depicted in Figure 6.

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

These results replicate Kahn's 1991 findings that when women candidates are covered by the media they are less likely to be discussed by their issues and more likely to be covered from a campaign strategy, or campaign viability, point of view. This is potentially harmful to women candidates because it portrays them as having less substantial views on the issues. An example of the media's focus on the strategy of the candidates rather than substantive issues is in their extensive coverage of Marilyn Musgrave's handling of the attack ads waged against her by homosexual groups. Although the underlying theme of this coverage was Musgrave's political stance on homosexual marriage, the stories focused on her plea for more money to fight back or reactions to the advertisements.

Masculine v. Feminine Issues

Another variable that was tested to check for a gender difference was the "issues" that candidate's stories focused on, or mentioned. For example, if a story was about the ongoing War in Iraq, and the candidate had a sound bite, the story would be labeled "foreign policy" as an issue. Some obvious patterns emerge when the frequency of male candidate's stories mentioning issues is plotted against female candidates. Male candidates were featured in more stories discussing economics, defense and education. Female candidates were featured in more stories discussing the environment and healthcare.

The issues that Kahn had labeled “masculine issues”, such as agriculture, economics, defense, foreign policy and crime were grouped together to form a single category of “masculine issues”. In addition, issues that Kahn had labeled “feminine issues”, such as minority rights, health care, women’s rights, social programs and education were grouped together to form a single category of “feminine issues”. The frequency of male and female candidate’s being featured in news stories discussing these issues, in all stories that discussed issues, is depicted in Figure 7.

[FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

The results in Figure 7 indicate that masculine issues are discussed in 66.9% of the stories featuring male candidates and only 55.6% of the stories featuring female candidates. Feminine issues are discussed in 43% of the stories featuring male candidates and 55.6% of the stories featuring female candidates. This indicates that women candidates were more likely to be covered with feminine issues, which, as discussed above, can be either beneficial or harmful to their campaign depending on the important issues to their constituencies.

These differences may not be a result of media bias, but instead may represent differences in what issues women candidates choose to highlight or find to be the most important. As many of the stories in the sample are “in studio interviews” with the candidates, candidate free air time or coverage of candidate’s campaign events, the candidate’s had a large amount of control over what was covered.

CONCLUSION

Perceivable differences between television news coverage of male and female candidates exist. The results of a content analysis indicate that female candidates are more likely than male candidates to receive less coverage overall. When they are covered, their coverage is more negative coverage and more likely to focus on strategy, rather than issues. When female candidates do receive issue coverage, the issues discussed are more likely to be traditional “women’s issues”. Female candidates are also more likely to be covered by female reporters.

All of these results carry many of the same implications discussed in previous campaign coverage content analyses: female candidates receive less name recognition and are portrayed as less viable candidates by the news media (Devitt, 1999; Kahn, 1994; 1992; Leeper, 1991; Smith, 1997). The results indicate that local television news coverage is subject to the same gendered coverage as newspapers and that the move towards equality found by researchers following 1992 (“The Year of the Woman”) were temporary.

With new research on female candidates that find female candidates enjoy equal rates of electoral success to male candidates, the implications of gendered news coverage must be further analyzed. Recent research discusses the dearth of females in politics as a result of a shortage of women seeking political office (Fox and Lawless, 2004). One possible reason for women’s reluctance to enter politics is their belief that they will be discriminated against. If women view media that portray female candidates with a negative slant and not in terms of substantive issues, they may be more inclined to believe that institutions are biased against them and decide not to seek candidacy.

Another implication of these results comes from research on the effect of viewing coverage of a viable female candidate on adolescent women. In a study conducted by Campbell and Wolbrecht (2006), the results indicated that the presence of women running for office in their area made adolescent girls more likely to articulate a desire to be involved in politics in the future. They called this the “role model effect” and attributed it to adolescent girls increased communication with their parents about politics. The “role model effect” required that female candidates’ be visible and receive attention from the media. The results that indicate that women receive less coverage overall is discouraging for the future of female candidates because adolescent women in 2004 were exposed to less coverage of female candidates. Campbell and Wolbrecht speculate that a woman candidate for presidential office could have long term effects on women’s representation. With the 2008 presidential nomination bid of Senator Hillary Clinton in a highly publicized campaign, it will be interesting to see how adolescent girls’ inclinations to participate in politics changes in the following decade

Although these findings provide a good indication of some continuing differences regarding gendered campaign coverage, all findings are subject to a number of caveats. The sample size is limited, representing only a fraction of all elections in a single election cycle at a single level of political office. The ability to generalize these results to other levels and years of elections is unclear as indicated by the research that suggests that prior to “The Year of the Women”, differences in quantity and substance existed, but immediately following that trend of increased representation, the quantity and substance of coverage was nearly equal. Another influx of women in political office may alter these results again.

In addition, each election year there may be different issues that are most salient to voters. If voters are most concerned with traditionally “masculine issues”, such as defense and foreign policy, the media might represent these preferences through their coverage. More research must be conducted to determine how much media coverage is a result of the conditions of the time rather than gender discrimination. Another limitation is that it is impossible to causally link any differences between male and female candidate coverage to a media bias. Women candidates may intentionally stress their strategy or personal characteristics over issues. They might spend less time courting the media and therefore be less likely to be featured for long stories or depicted in a sound bite.

Another important limitation of this study is that it only considers information provided by the local news media, which might not be solely responsible for informing voters on the candidates. According to a study by Lichter and Noyes (1995), although more people relied on the television news to get their election coverage, they only actually increased their knowledge about candidates if they read information in a newspaper. Additionally, it has been suggested that television advertisements are influential in informing voters.

Regardless of the above mentioned limitations, the results make it clear that within this sample, there are definite differences between the coverage of male and female candidates. Regardless of the implications of these differences, there is a bias in the media against female candidates that must be further investigated and a solution must be found. As women enter politics in greater numbers, the differences in coverage may correct themselves, but until then journalists should be held to a standard of gender equality in coverage.

APPENDIX A:

Figure 1: The percentage of women in the United States House of Representatives from 1987-2007, according to the Center for American Women and Politics

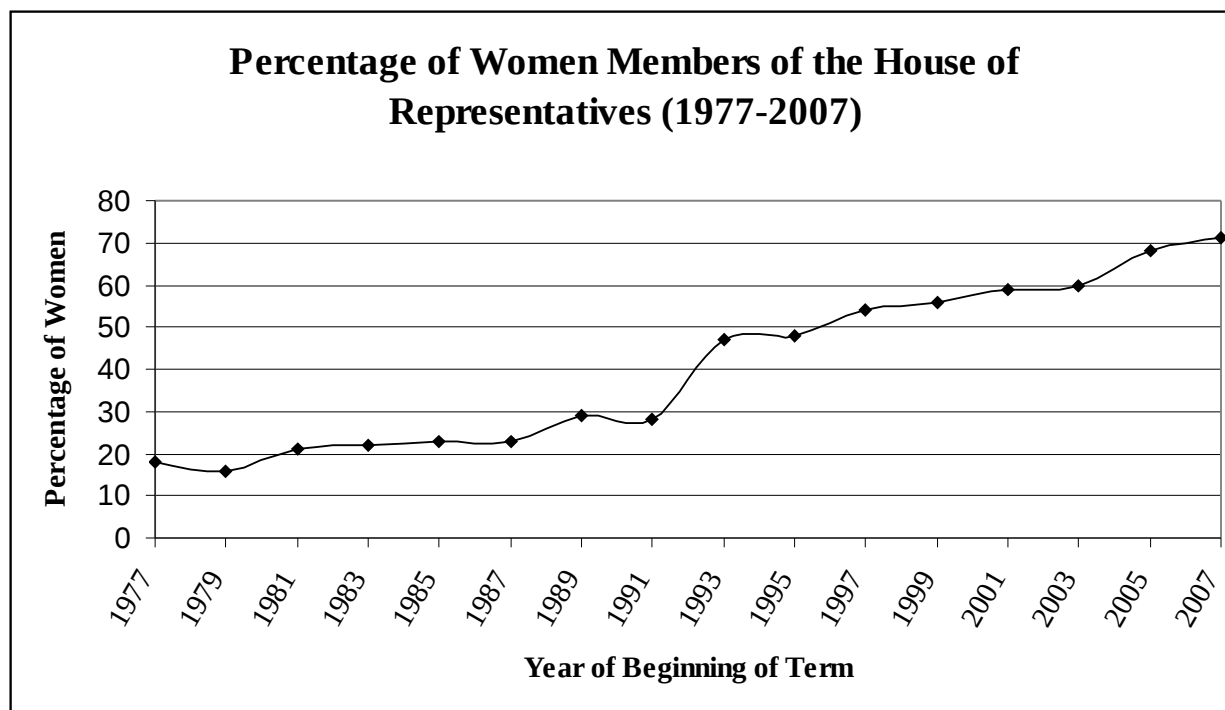


Figure 2: A summary of the sample of elections utilized.

Characteristics of the Candidates Used in the Sample, by gender		
	Male	Female
Candidates Overall	58	18
<i>Republican</i>	30	6
<i>Democrat</i>	24	12
<i>Third Party</i>	4	0
<i>Incumbents</i>	29	7
<i>Challengers</i>	29	11
<i>Election Winners</i>	32	9
<i>Election Losers</i>	26	9
<i>Average Percentage Vote</i>	51.4%	52.2%
Gender Breakdown of Elections		
<i>Male v. Female</i>	14	
<i>Male v. Male</i>	26	
<i>Female v. Female</i>	2	

Figure 3: The average length of the story (in seconds) for male and female candidates, by incumbency.

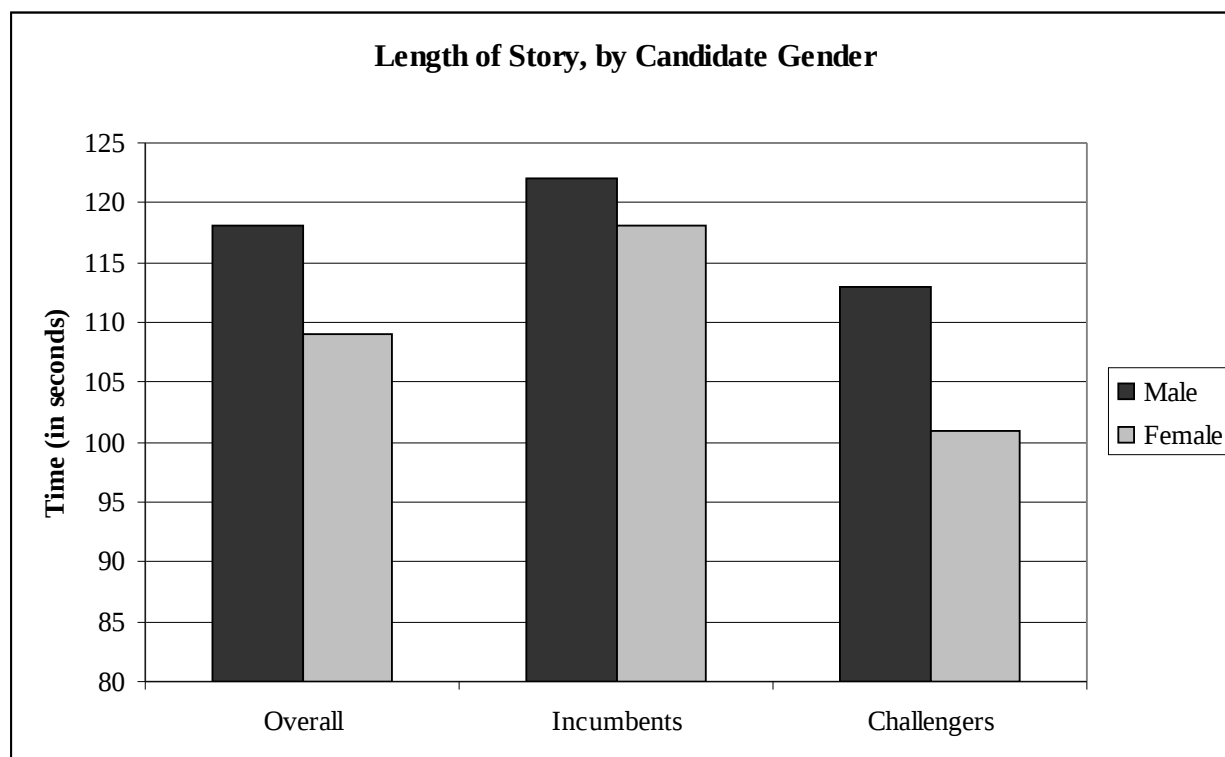


Figure 4: The Overall Tone of the Story, as determined by Lear Center raters, for male and female candidates (stories with “no tone” are not depicted graphically).

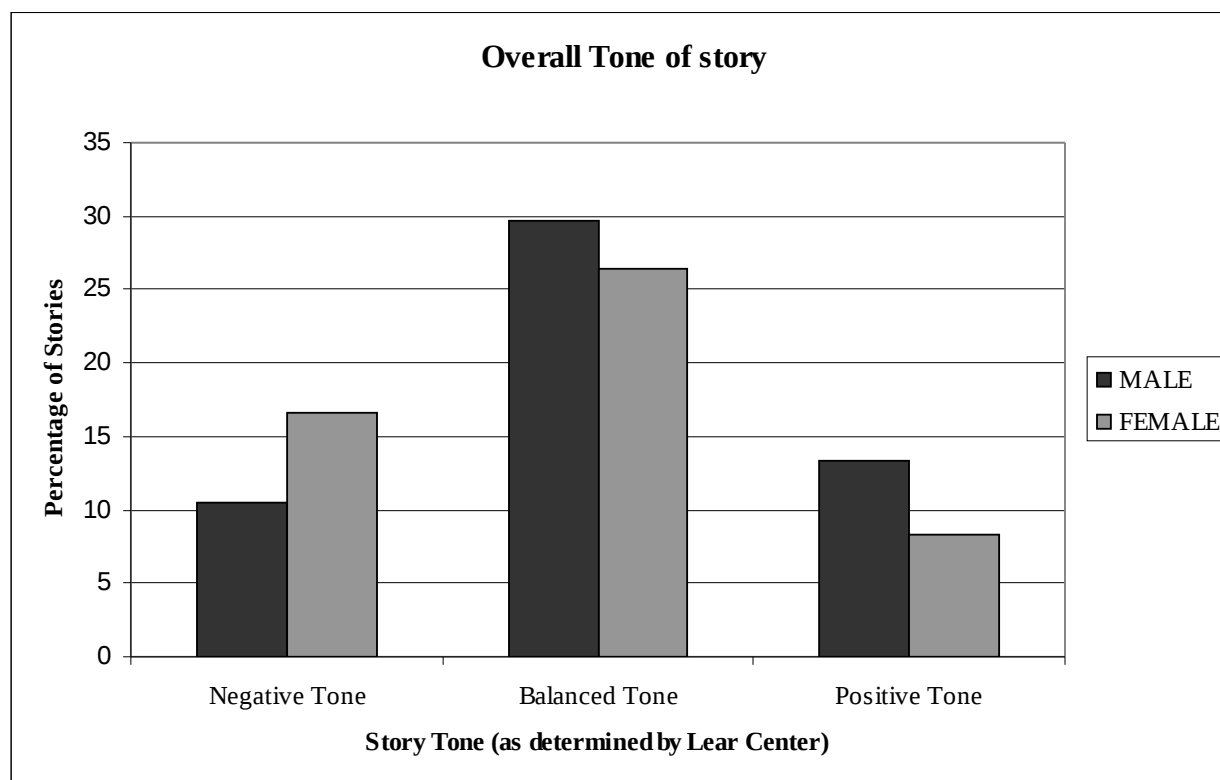


Figure 5: The percentage of stories about candidates covered by male and female reporters, by candidate gender.

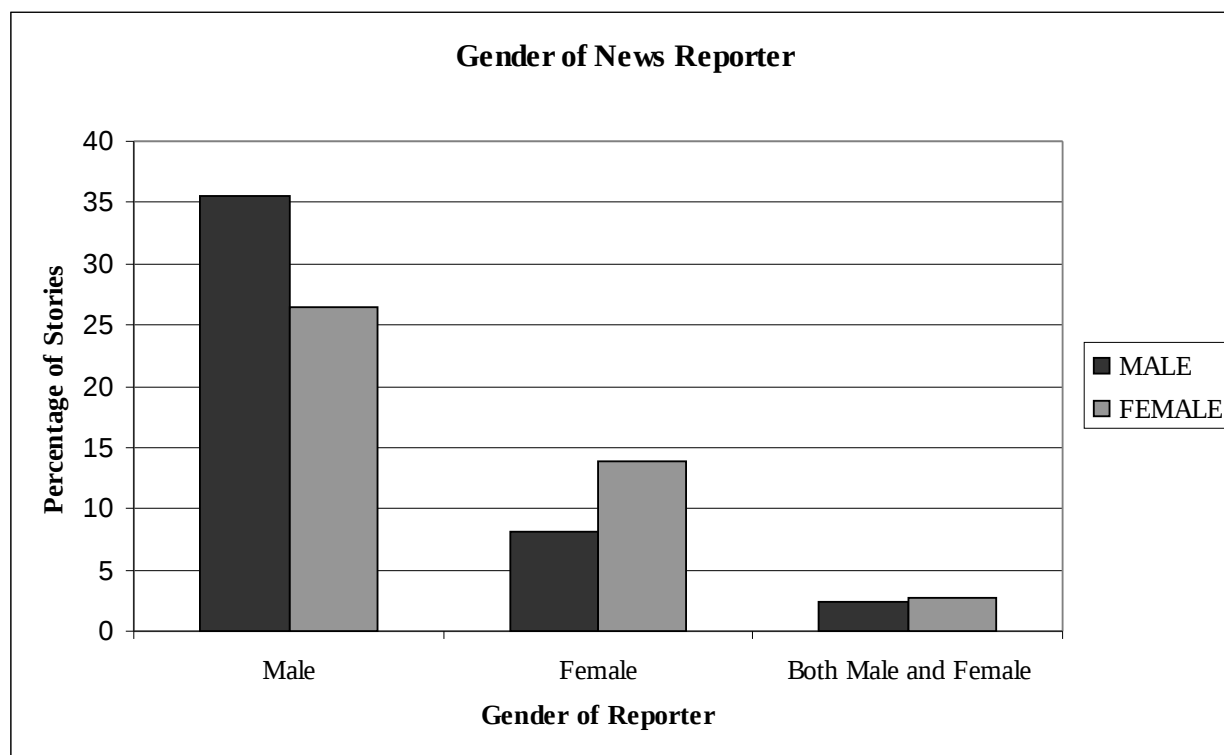


Figure 6: The primary focus, or frame, of the news story as strategy and issues, by gender.

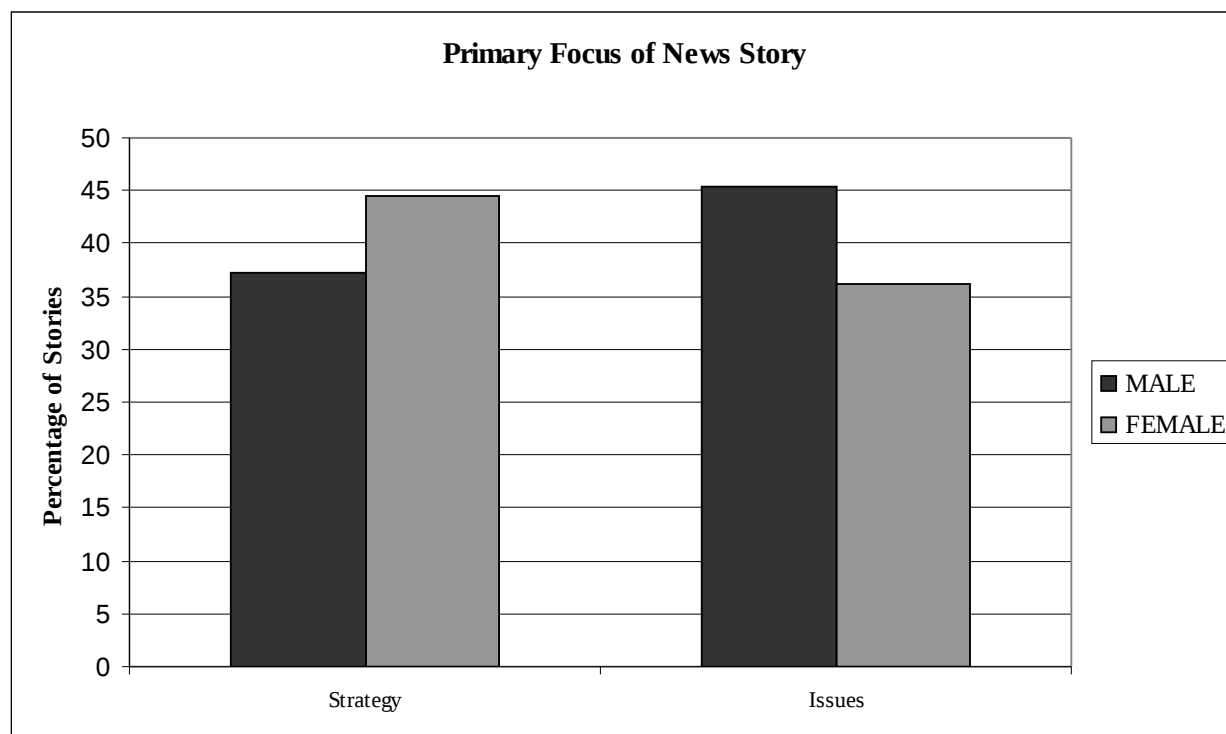
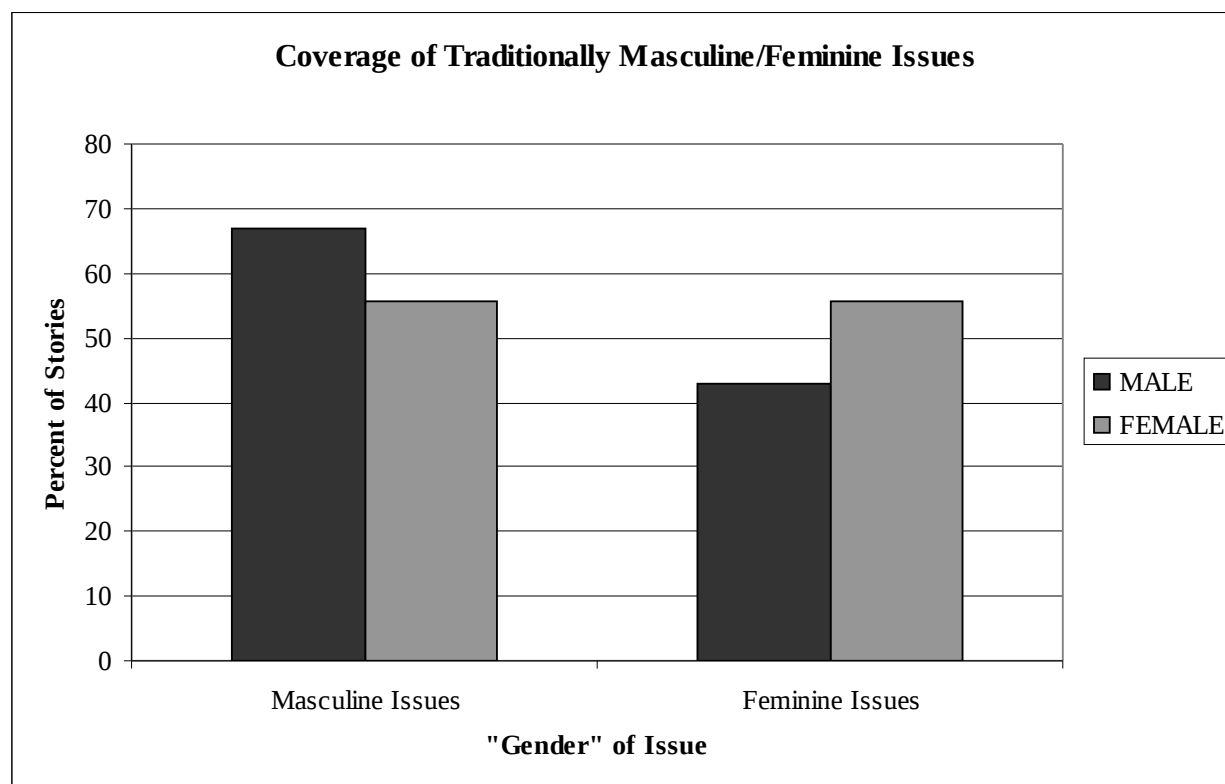


Figure 7: The coverage of traditionally masculine/feminine issues, by gender.



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