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Source: *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Jun., 2008), pp. 239-252

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc. on behalf of the University of Utah

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20299729>

Accessed: 18/01/2010 21:41

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# Press Coverage of Mayoral Candidates

## The Role of Gender in News Reporting and Campaign Issue Speech

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Some research on gender bias in news coverage of political campaigns indicates that the media portray male and female candidates differently. Research to date, however, has focused only on elections to national or statewide offices, where confounding variables such as party, incumbency, and competitiveness are present. The authors resolve this problem by focusing their analysis of media campaign coverage on nonpartisan, open-seat, and competitive mayoral races. The authors' content analysis of press coverage in six mayoral elections suggests that press coverage is not biased in favor of male candidates. The authors, however, find that the presence of a woman on the ballot expands the range of issue coverage in local campaigns in ways favorable to perceived strengths of female candidates.

**Keywords:** *gender; elections; candidates; urban politics; political psychology; stereotypes; mayors; media; campaigns*

Because media coverage of electoral contests is the primary mechanism for informing citizens about political candidates and issues, the type of coverage provided candidates may play an important role in shaping voters' perceptions (Kahn 1994b). Indeed, research suggests that gender cues and stereotypes affect voting behavior (Paolino 1995; Kahn 1996; Dolan 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2002), especially in low-information contests (McDermott 1997; Plutzer and Zipp 1996; Dolan 1998). Women candidates are perceived as having more typical feminine traits and fewer masculine traits; being more liberal, Democratic, and feminist; and better able to handle so-called compassion issues such as health care, education, and women's rights issues. In contrast, male candidates are perceived as having more typical masculine traits and fewer feminine traits, being more conservative, and better able to handle issues such as foreign policy and crime (Rosenwasser and Seale 1988; Leeper 1991; Kahn 1994a; Koch 2000; McDermott 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2002). Male candidates are also seen as more electable (Leeper 1991; Sapiro 1981-1982).

If journalists carry the same prejudices as voters, such stereotyping may influence their reporting, leading to news analysis that favors male candidates over female candidates, thus affecting outcomes in elections involving male and female candidates (Kahn and Goldenberg 1991). More specifically, if journalists present candidates through a gendered lens, coverage may

be biased in favor of male candidates who are stereotypically seen as having the appropriate traits, policy priorities, and leadership skills for public office (Koch 1999; Alexander and Anderson 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Lawless 2004). Because of the apparent link between news coverage and electoral outcomes, it is important to examine whether bias exists in the press's treatment of male and female candidates.

Studies of gender media bias have focused on national and state gubernatorial contests (Kahn 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Kropf and Boiney 2001; Devitt 2002; Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart, 2001; Smith 1997; Aday and Devitt 2001; Heith 2001; Heldman, Carroll, and Olson 2005). One of the difficulties in studying media bias in these elections is sorting out the influence of factors such as incumbency, party, and the competitiveness of the race. For example, if women receive less coverage than men, is it because they are running as challengers as opposed to incumbents, who are likely to receive more coverage because of their status? If coverage of women focuses on soft issues such as health care and education, as opposed to hard issues such as national defense and taxes, is it because of their gender or because the Democratic Party, the label under

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**Authors' Note:** This article was first presented at the American Political Science Association's annual meeting in 2004. We would like to thank Nancy Carrillo for her assistance with the project. Of course, any errors are our own.

which most women run, is perceived to be stronger on these issues? Furthermore, if women receive coverage that makes them appear less electable, is it because they are women, or is it because they have too few resources to create a competitive contest? These factors are important confounding variables that may help produce bias when not adequately controlled.

To address these issues, and to more clearly understand media bias in the coverage of female candidates, we turn our attention to mayoral races. These urban contests offer a variety of strengths over previous research and allow us to examine this question in an alternative electoral context. First and foremost, about three-quarters of all cities employ nonpartisan ballots, which means that the influence of partisanship is somewhat muted in local politics.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, because urban populations tend to be largely Democratic, local races often pit intraparty candidates against each other, making party identification an irrelevant cue for voter decision making. This context allows us to control the potentially confounding effects of party. We also have chosen to focus on open-seat races, where incumbency is not an issue. And we have selected cases to maximize a competitive campaign environment, which stimulates election coverage. Our objective is twofold: one, to determine whether media coverage of intergender mayoral candidates is different or biased; and two, to determine if the presence of a female on the ballot changes the scope of issues discussed in mayoral campaigns.

## **Women Candidates and Press Coverage**

Research on how media treat male and female candidates has generally focused on four areas: volume of coverage, candidates' viability, candidates' issues, and candidates' traits. Kahn's (1994a) seminal study of female U.S. Senate and gubernatorial candidates examined all four areas and reached several important conclusions. One, female Senate candidates received less coverage than men, and more of their coverage was devoted to their electoral viability. Two, coverage of female Senate candidates competing against incumbents tended to be more negative, indicating they were less likely to win. Three, female gubernatorial candidates did not receive less overall coverage than male candidates; nor was more of their coverage devoted to viability concerns.

In both electoral contexts, men received more issue coverage than women. Furthermore, the issue coverage of female Senate candidates was more likely to be about "female" issues, compared to coverage of male Senate

candidates. In gubernatorial contests, not only were "female" issues discussed more frequently, male candidates tended to discuss them somewhat more frequently than female candidates. Reporters also discussed male personality traits (e.g., toughness, leadership skills, intelligence) slightly more than female traits (e.g., honesty, compassion), especially in Senate races.<sup>2</sup>

Other research on Senate and gubernatorial races reveals no bias in the quantity of coverage (Smith 1997; Devitt 2002; Rausch, Rozell, and Wilson 1999) or suggests greater coverage of women (Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001—but see Bystrom 2006). In terms of the quality of coverage, men's and women's issue coverage was similar on crime and government finances, but male candidate coverage consistently emphasized economic concerns (Smith 1997; Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001), a traditional male issue, while female candidate coverage was more likely to emphasize social issues, a traditional area for females (Smith 1997). Viability coverage in some cases is negative (Bystrom 2006; Gidengil and Everitt 2003), but others find no viability bias (Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001; Smith 1997) and Bystrom et al. (2004) suggests that this problem has lessened over time. Also, contrary to Kahn (1994a), coverage of women was neither more negative (Smith 1997; Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001) nor more extensive on issues (Smith 1997).

A separate area of concern is media coverage of more personal topics not directly related to campaign issues. Research shows that coverage dealing with candidates' gender, marital status, children, age, personality, and appearance was far more likely to be about female than male candidates (Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001; Devitt 2002; Banwart, Bystrom, and Robertson 2003). Coverage of Elizabeth Dole's campaign for the Republican nomination in 2000, for example, was disproportionately about her status as the "first" serious female presidential candidate, personality, style, and appearance, and far less on her substantive issue positions (Aday and Devitt 2001; Heith 2001; Heldman, Carroll, and Olson 2005). Such coverage may be detrimental to women because it helps in placing the gender of the candidate as a priority consideration over substantive policy themes.

In sum, findings on gender bias in campaign media coverage are mixed. In general, though, women tend to receive more nonpolicy, personal coverage than issue coverage; there still appears to be a slight tendency for coverage of women to focus on compassion issues and for coverage of men to focus on "hard" issues. Given the unsettled nature of the empirical findings on gender bias in media coverage, continued examination of this topic is warranted.

## Women in Urban Politics

According to the Center for American Women and Politics (2006), 17.3 percent of cities with populations larger than thirty thousand are led by a female mayor. This compares favorably to the number of female governors, which is 16 percent, but less favorably to the percentage of women serving in statewide office generally (25.1 percent). And according to the National League of Cities (2003), in 2001 the percentage of women serving on city councils in small cities was 25 percent, while the percentage of women serving in medium and large cities was 36 percent. Both of these figures compare favorably to the percentage of women serving in Congress (15.1 percent) and state legislatures (22.8 percent).<sup>3</sup> On balance, then, women do relatively well at the local level.

Scholars have examined the influence of women leaders, both descriptively and substantively, on public policy at the urban level (Gelb and Gittell 1986). Some studies reveal few differences concerning the policy priorities of men and women elected officials (Beck 2001; Bers 1978). Indeed, the attitudes of male mayors may be more like female mayors as a result of the political context of cities (Tolleson-Rinehart 2001). Others, however, suggest that women are much stronger leaders on issues important to women than are men (Boles 2001) and that they are successful in enhancing the representation of women in public employment and service delivery (Boles 2001, 82; Kerr, Miller, and Reid 1998; Saltzstein 1986). Local female elected officials also appear to be more constituent oriented (Beck 2001, 56).

For a number of reasons, it is important to examine the way local media cover female candidates running for local office, a venue that is often overlooked in scholarship on women, campaigns, and media effects. First, differences in leadership may translate to the campaign trail, where women candidates may alter the debate to include policy priorities that are stereotypically female candidate strengths and priorities (Dolan 2005).

Second, if one assumes that media reinforce gender stereotypes in their coverage of election campaigns, the nature of the urban political agenda may advantage women. Issues such as health care, housing, child care, jobs, education, poverty, transportation, and regional planning are not only key parts of the urban agenda, they affect women differently than they affect men (Flammang 1997; Gelb and Gittell 1986). On the other hand, male strengths may be reinforced by the policy context of urban politics. Specifically, crime and economic development tend to be higher priority concerns

for urban electorates. Law enforcement, for example, usually consumes the biggest share of local budgets (Morgan, England, and Pelissero 2007, 299). Because these issues deal with personal security and are often thought to require toughness, a personality trait "owned" by men (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993), women might be disadvantaged. Likewise, because economic matters are often at the heart of local politics (Peterson 1981), male candidates may be advantaged by news coverage.

A third reason to study press bias in urban campaigns is to test the external validity of findings developed via the lens of national and statewide campaigns. Although there have been many studies conducted on this topic, all have been of statewide and national campaigns that deal with a set of issues quite different from that in the local arena. Finally, as the statistics on female office holding suggest, local elected office is often a gateway experience for female politicians. The experience of how women are treated by the press in coverage of their campaigns may affect not only how women govern at the city level in the present but also their desire to pursue higher office in the future.

## Expectations

In our effort to understand more fully the nature of campaign media coverage in mixed-gender campaigns for mayor, we test the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Male candidates receive more news coverage than female candidates.

*Hypothesis 2:* Male candidates receive more favorable news coverage on electability than female candidates.

*Hypothesis 3:* Male candidates receive more favorable issue and trait coverage than female candidates.

*Hypothesis 4:* Male candidates receive less personal (e.g., family and appearance) coverage than female candidates.

*Hypothesis 5:* The presence of a female candidate expands the issue discussion of the campaign in ways favorable to perceived female issue strengths (i.e., it increases discussion of compassion issues).

## Research Design and Methods

To determine whether there are differences in how male and female mayoral campaigns are reported by

the news media, we analyzed the general election newspaper coverage of six recent mayoral races. A focus on newspaper over television and radio coverage is justified for a number of reasons. Although the general informational value of newspapers vis-à-vis television is a matter of contention (Druckman 2005; Price and Zaller 1993), newspapers provide critical information on local elections (Mondak 1995). They not only provide more political information than television (Druckman 2005), the effect of newspaper reading on voting in local elections is significantly greater than exposure to television news broadcasts (McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy 1999). Local papers also devote more resources to covering city hall than do local television stations (Coulson and Lacy 2003), which are reducing their coverage of local public affairs (Slattery and Hakanen 1994). Last, local papers tend to set the agenda of local broadcast networks (Downie and Kaiser 2002, 64-66). In sum, voters are likely to get most of their information about local campaigns from the local press, and because publishable print media is generally archived and easily accessible, it provides the most practical research venue to examine potential difference or bias in local media reporting.

The six mayoral races we chose represent a combination of intergender and intragender races so that comparisons both within and between contexts can be examined. By including both types of contexts, we can examine if and how a female candidate changes the scope and coverage of the race. This is relevant because we hypothesize that female candidates will expand the issue coverage at the local level, and this can only be determined by comparing intergender with intragender mayoral race contexts.

We also held constant a variety of factors when picking our sample cities because we wanted to ensure that the larger context of the campaign could be controlled for without a large-*N* study covering hundreds of mayoral races. Specifically, we chose recent, nonpartisan, open-seat, and competitive elections in large cities with a major newspaper. In addition, each contest first held a "primary" race that winnowed the candidates down to two for a general or runoff election, and all of our eventual winners in the intergender races were female. We used recent elections because we wanted our question addressed in a contemporary political setting. And a competitive context was particularly important because we wanted to ensure that there was adequate local news coverage of both candidates.<sup>4</sup> Our race coverage therefore includes the following mayoral elections in 2000 to 2003 regionally matching an intergender

with an intragender contest: Sacramento with Seattle, Cleveland with Detroit, and Houston with Dallas (see Table 1).<sup>5</sup> Cleveland, Dallas, and Sacramento had intergender races, while Detroit, Houston, and Seattle had intragender (male/male) contests.

For every city except Sacramento, the content analysis of news coverage began the day immediately following the primary election and went through Election Day. Sacramento's primary election was held eight months prior to the general election; thus, to make its election coverage more comparable to the other cities, we started our content analysis September 12. We used LEXIS/NEXIS and searched by candidates' names to identify articles for Cleveland, Houston, and Seattle. For Detroit, Dallas, and Sacramento, we created an index of articles using Newslibrary.com and then ordered the microfiche. All articles that mentioned either candidate's name were included regardless of what section of the newspaper they were located in or whether it was directly related to the campaign or the candidate. This is important because all news coverage of candidates represent information about their background, record, and activity that could influence voters' attitudes toward them.<sup>6</sup>

Following Kahn (1994a, 1994b, 1996), our unit of analysis is the individual paragraph within each article. We coded paragraphs because many articles typically cover multiple issues and aspects of the campaign, and this allows us to carefully count the number of mentions of candidates, candidates' traits, issue coverage, and electability.

Our coding scheme relies on past research in the area of women and politics as well as the psychological literature that helps us identify sex stereotypes for men and women. From this we identified five areas where differences may be found between male and female candidates: overall candidate coverage, electability, traits, personal issues, and policy issues. In each case, we simply noted when a candidate was a target of discussion and the nature of that discussion. Paragraphs could have multiple hits per category, including the mention of both candidates or multiple issues. Paragraphs could also say nothing about either candidate.

In terms of general coverage of the candidates, we noted three areas of potential bias or differences. First, the simple mention of the candidate within the paragraph was noted. Second, we noted whether the paper mentioned an endorsement by a public official or group or an average voter. Third, we also noted mentions of the candidate's experience.

**Table 1**  
**Characteristics of Cities in Sample**

|                             | Cleveland <sup>a</sup> | Detroit           | Dallas <sup>a</sup> | Houston          | Sacramento <sup>a</sup> | Seattle                   |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Election dates              |                        |                   |                     |                  |                         |                           |
| Primary election            | 10/2/01                | 9/11/01           | 1/19/02             | 11/4/03          | 3/7/00                  | 9/18/01                   |
| General election            | 11/6/01                | 11/6/01           | 2/16/02             | 12/6/03          | 11/7/00                 | 11/6/01                   |
| Election results            |                        |                   |                     |                  |                         |                           |
| Primary election winner (%) | 30                     | 51                | 49                  | 38               | 22                      | 34                        |
| Primary election loser (%)  | 29                     | 34                | 39                  | 33               | 20                      | 34                        |
| General election winner (%) | 54                     | 54                | 55                  | 63               | 54                      | 51                        |
| General election loser (%)  | 46                     | 46                | 45                  | 37               | 46                      | 49                        |
| Article <i>N</i>            | 93                     | 95                | 68                  | 76               | 60                      | 84                        |
| Paragraph <i>N</i>          | 2,097                  | 1,708             | 1,489               | 1,910            | 1,186                   | 1,813                     |
| Newspaper                   | <i>Plain-Dealer</i>    | <i>Free Press</i> | <i>Morning News</i> | <i>Chronicle</i> | <i>Bee</i>              | <i>Post-Intelligencer</i> |

a. Cities with female-male mayoral contest.

Previous research points to electability coverage as an area of potential gender bias. Therefore, we coded any mention of candidate electability including polls, attractiveness to specific groups of voters (black, white, Hispanic),<sup>7</sup> debates, and so on. We also used a 7-point electability scale, adapted from Kahn (1996), which measured the general strength of the candidate. The scale included the following categories: noncompetitive sure loser (coded 1), noncompetitive but gaining ground (2), competitive but losing ground (3), competitive (4), competitive but gaining ground (5), likely winner but losing ground (6), and likely winner (7). The point of the scale is to gauge whether the print media are more likely to favor male candidates over female candidates. Finally, in this category, we also examined the percentage of times each candidate's primary results were mentioned, which is also an indicator of electability.

Because previous research suggests that male and female candidates are perceived differently in terms of their policy expertise and because male policy expertise is often seen as more valuable, particularly in executive offices, we placed issues into stereotypical male and female categories. This allows us to examine if the print media favor male issues over female issues and how that affects coverage of intergender and intragender races.

Traditionally, male issues are considered economics, crime, management, and infrastructure. Female issues are often considered compassion issues and include education, social welfare, and the environment. For economic issues, we included any issue mention that involved economics including taxes,

employment, downtown revitalization, growth, budget, and so on. Infrastructure and transportation included issues involving roads, streets, cyber optics, airports, water projects, and so on. Crime issues involved fighting crime. Management issues included administration of government, government efficiency, government ethics, personnel, charter reform, and so on. Education included mentions of K-12, higher education, vocational training, and worker training. Social welfare was a broad category that included issues about health and welfare, affordable housing, senior issues, child care, abortion, helping the poor, civil rights, and so on. Quality of life issues covered neighborhood improvements and parks and recreation. Environment includes mention of air and water quality, toxic cleanup, and so on.

We coded mentions of personal issues separately. Our personal category covers appearance mentions as well as mentions about spouses or children.

Women candidates are potentially stereotyped as typical women—with traits such as soft, gentle, kind, passive, consensus builder, honest—while male candidates are potentially stereotyped as typical men—with traits such as tough, assertive, aggressive, strong leader, knowledgeable, and objective. Empirically, male traits are more desirable, especially in executive positions (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Thus, we also coded male and female trait mentions.

Our method is straightforward. We calculate the percentage of paragraphs for each of our subject areas where we expect to see difference in press coverage—overall candidate coverage, electability, traits, policy issues, and personal issues. Using *t*-tests, we then compare

three different aspects of intergender and intragender races. First, we examine press coverage and compare the eventual winner to the eventual loser in the intergender and intragender races. This within-race analysis allows us to ask and answer whether female and male candidate coverage within the same contest was largely similar or different. Second, we compare the eventual winner in the all-male race to the eventual winner in the female-male race and the eventual loser in the all-male race to the eventual loser in the female-male race to see how these change across race context. Recall that in the intergender races, the female candidate is the eventual winner. Third, we aggregate our measures to examine press coverage between races, combining press coverage for both the winner and loser in each race to more carefully determine if and what differences exist across race contexts.

Given the nature of our data, in what way can we speak of coverage bias versus difference? Because we lack a measure of the campaign message, and because candidates emphasize certain issues, traits, and endorsements as a part of their overall campaign strategy, when it comes to these matters, we are limited to an assessment of male-female differences in press coverage. While this difference is still a “bias,” we recognize that we cannot necessarily attribute it to reporting stereotypes. To assume otherwise excludes the possibility that the press was simply covering the campaigns that were waged, a very likely scenario. When it comes to coverage of candidate viability, experience, and personal issues, however, differences in coverage are more likely a case of reporter bias. Each of the female candidates we examined was well qualified; each had significant political experience in elective office; and each made it to the general election, and won. Given parity on both the viability and experience dimensions, there would be no reason to expect men to get more coverage. Likewise, it is generally the case that candidates do not campaign on their families, appearance, clothing, choice of lipstick, accessories, footwear, and so on. And although it is true that candidates use their family circumstances for political advantage, it was not apparent to us in the races we studied that female candidates were doing this more than their male opponents. For these reasons, we term differences in viability, experience, and family/personal coverage gender-biased reporting.

### Sample Cities

Although our sample is not representative, we have taken care to include cities in three regions of

the country—West, Southwest, and Midwest—and to include cities that vary in terms of economic conditions, racial and ethnic demographics, and political tendencies. In terms of economics, Detroit and Cleveland are representative of declining “rustbelt” manufacturing cities that have lost both population and firms over the past several decades. The other cities in the sample—Houston, Dallas, Sacramento, and Seattle—have generally prospered at the expense of older manufacturing centers (see Furdell, Wolman, and Hill 2005).

According to the U.S. Census, Houston is the largest city in our sample with 1.9 million residents, followed by Dallas (1.2 million), Detroit (951,270), Seattle (560,000), Cleveland (478,403), and Sacramento (407,018). Houston and Dallas are also the most diverse in terms of race; both have large populations of both blacks and Hispanics. By contrast, Cleveland and Detroit are majority black (although by 51 percent in Cleveland compared to 82 percent in Detroit). Seattle and Sacramento are both majority white, and distinctive insofar as they have large populations of Asian Americans, a demographic characteristic more typical of Western cities than cities in other regions of the country. Sacramento also is more diverse than Seattle in large part because its Hispanic population is nearly three times as large in percentage terms (22 percent versus 8 percent).

Politically, our cities represent a mix of styles and issue agendas. In Detroit and Cleveland, staving off further decline is a top issue, and this includes things like how best to address poverty, crime, economic development, race relations, and urban education (Orr and Stoker 1994; Swanstrom 1985). Politics in Dallas and Houston are influenced greatly by conservative business interests, and both are thought of as having entrepreneurial regimes, which favor downtown development over neighborhood interests (Morgan 2004, chap. 4; Thomas and Murray 1991). Sacramento and Seattle tend toward progressive politics; indeed, both were among the first large cities with relatively small minority populations to elect minority mayors (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 2003, 367-68; Winn and Palmer 1996).

The demographic and political profiles of each city in our sample influence patterns of candidate emergence and electoral politics. In Detroit, two African American males, State House Minority Leader Kwame Kilpatrick and City Councilor Gil Hill, faced one another, while in Cleveland an African American male, former Clinton administration official Raymond Pierce faced a white female, Cuyahoga County



Commissioner Jane Campbell. In Dallas a white, male businessman named Tom Dunning faced a white, female former city councilor, Laura Miller. In Houston, however, Bill White, a white businessman, faced Orlando Sanchez, a Latino city councilor. In Sacramento, the general election involved two white candidates, City Councilors Heather Fargo and Rob Kerth, while in Seattle, King County Councilor Greg Nickels faced City Attorney Mark Sidran. Both Nickels and Sidran are white.

The unique features of these communities may affect our findings. For example, given the emphasis on economic matters in four of our six cities—Dallas, Houston, Cleveland, and Detroit—it is possible that press coverage will favor male candidates, given that economics and development issues are perceived as a male strength. The nature of progressive politics in Seattle and Sacramento, however, may produce more equitable coverage for women and female issues generally. Overall, however, we do not expect these contextual differences to matter greatly in terms of the nature of press coverage of male and female candidates.

## Results

Our first hypothesis examines the amount of general news coverage. Given past research, we expect to find a bias in favor of male candidates. Table 2 presents the results for overall candidate coverage. In terms of the overall attention given to each candidate, we find no difference in candidate coverage within each type of race. In both the female-male and male-male races, candidate mentions were essentially the same for the losing and winning candidate. We also find no support for the notion that intragender male races receive more coverage than intergender races. In our study, the intergender race received more local coverage than the intragender contests. We did, however, find some support for the hypothesis in endorsement and experience coverage. Notice that in the intergender races, the female candidate and eventual winner got significantly and substantially less coverage of her endorsements than her male counterpart, while in the all-male races, there was no difference in coverage between the eventual winner and loser. And in the experience variable, we found that while there was no difference in coverage of the experience of the candidates when a female was present on the ballot, for the all-male races, there was a significant difference, with greater coverage of the qualifications of the eventual winner. The fact that in the intragender

race the loser received less coverage of his experience than in the intergender race plus the fact that the female candidates received on average significantly less endorsement coverage than her losing opponent, while in the intragender race coverage of endorsements was equal, provides some support for the hypothesis that women get less general coverage of their qualifications and their supporters as expressed through endorsements.

Table 2 also examines the differences in electability. Recall the gender bias hypothesis would argue that women candidates are generally perceived as less viable, and therefore press coverage may be more likely to focus on horserace issues for women candidates. Table 2 shows very little support for this hypothesis. In terms of simple mentions of candidate electability, there is no evidence to suggest that women candidates receive more coverage. The eventual female winner receives about the same amount of coverage as her male counterpart, and the all-male races we examined seem to focus greater attention on horserace coverage than the female-male races. When we look at electability scoring, we again find no support for the hypothesis. Instead, we find that the eventual winner is seen, correctly, as more electable than his challenger and that both race contexts evaluated the electability chances of the winning and losing candidates about the same, with the eventual winner receiving a mean score that is competitive gaining ground and the eventual loser receiving a mean score that is competitive losing ground. There is a significant difference, however, within the female-male race for mentions of primary results.<sup>8</sup> Female candidates' results were mentioned more often than her male challengers, but primary results generally were mentioned more often in the all-male races. We do not believe this demonstrates strong support for the electability bias hypothesis.

The third hypothesis suggests that issue and trait coverage may be different for females than males and that across race contexts there may also be differences in attention to male and female issues. This is possible because sex stereotypes bias reporters' attention to female candidates to so-called compassion issues. Likewise, female candidates likely encourage this behavior, at least at the congressional level, by focusing more attention in their campaigns on compassion issues (Dabelko and Herrnson 1997). And evidence suggests that male congressional candidates often respond to the presence of a female candidate by focusing more attention on female issues than they otherwise would (Dolan 1998; Fox 1997). Thus, we



**Table 2**  
**Difference in Means of General News Coverage of Mayoral Races in Percentages of Paragraphs by Intergender and Intragender Races**

|  | General Election Winner | General Election Loser | Within-Race Difference |
|--|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Percentage of overall targeted paragraphs  |                         |                        |                        |
| Male-male race                             | 32.44                   | 31.98                  | 0.46                   |
| Female-male race                           | 36.85                   | 37.33                  | -0.48                  |
| Between-race difference                    | 4.41***                 | -5.35***               |                        |
| Endorsement coverage                       |                         |                        |                        |
| Male-male race                             | 1.77                    | 1.93                   | -0.16                  |
| Female-male race                           | 2.01                    | 3.52                   | -1.52***               |
| Between-race difference                    | -0.24                   | -1.59***               |                        |
| Experience                                 |                         |                        |                        |
| Male-male race                             | 3.54                    | 2.85                   | 0.68*                  |
| Female-male race                           | 3.29                    | 3.14                   | 0.15                   |
| Between-race difference                    | 0.24                    | -0.29                  |                        |
| Discussion of electability of candidate    |                         |                        |                        |
| Male-male race                             | 3.15                    | 2.56                   | 0.59**                 |
| Female-male race                           | 1.78                    | 1.70                   | 0.08                   |
| Between-race difference                    | 1.37***                 | 0.86**                 |                        |
| Rating of electability on 7-point scale    |                         |                        |                        |
| Male-male race                             | 4.43                    | 3.84                   | 0.59***                |
| Female-male race                           | 4.57                    | 3.85                   | 0.72***                |
| Between-race difference                    | -0.14                   | -0.01                  |                        |
| Discussion of primary results <sup>a</sup> |                         |                        |                        |
| Male-male race                             | 1.62                    | 1.53                   | 0.09                   |
| Female-male race                           | 0.92                    | 0.59                   | 0.33***                |
| Between-race difference                    | 0.70***                 | 0.94**                 |                        |

Note: Intragender,  $N = 5,432$ ; intergender,  $N = 4,771$ . intragender winner,  $N = 171$ ; intragender loser,  $N = 139$ ; intergender winner,  $N = 85$ ; intergender loser,  $N = 81$ .

a. Results do not include Sacramento.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

have several dimensions to consider. First, one hypothesis asserts that female candidates will receive more press attention on female issues and presumably less attention on traditional male issues. But we may also find that the presence of a female candidate expands the scope of issues, increasing the press coverage of traditional female issues for both the male and female candidates; presumably this is because the male candidate responds either to the gender of his opponent or because he responds to his opponent's issue agenda, which has a greater emphasis on compassion issues.

Table 3 presents the results. We find no support for the general hypothesis that women candidates receive more attention on female issues and less attention on male issues, at least within race context. In the case of male issues within race context, we find no difference between the female winner and the male loser in terms of press coverage on any of our male issues: economic development, infrastructure/transportation, crime, or management issues. These results compare

favorably with what we find in the all-male races where there is no difference across "male" issue dimensions between the eventual winner and loser. In the case of female compassion issues, we see a similar pattern. In two out of three of our female issues (education and quality of life), there was no difference within race context; both the eventual winner and loser regardless of gender received the same amount of issue exposure. We do see a significant difference in the area of social welfare, and in the expected way, with the female candidate receiving more coverage than her male opponent. But we also see a significant difference for the all-male intragender race, indicating that the male loser got more attention on this issue than the eventual winner. Because we are looking at quite a large number of issue areas, and given that we have only one exception to our finding, the weight of evidence favors the interpretation that within race context news reports equally focus on the same issues for both the eventual winner and loser regardless of candidate gender.

**Table 3**  
**Difference of Mean on Issue, Family/**  
**Appearance, and Trait Coverage of Mayoral**  
**Races in Percentages of Paragraphs by**  
**Intergender and Intragender Races**

|                                     | General<br>Election<br>Winner | General<br>Election<br>Loser | Within-<br>Race<br>Difference |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Male issues</b>                  |                               |                              |                               |
| Economic development                |                               |                              |                               |
| Male-male race                      | 3.20                          | 3.04                         | 0.16                          |
| Female-male race                    | 2.62                          | 2.43                         | 0.19                          |
| Between-race difference             | 0.58                          | 0.61                         |                               |
| Infrastructure/transportation       |                               |                              |                               |
| Male-male race                      | 2.72                          | 2.96                         | 0.24                          |
| Female-male race                    | 1.51                          | 1.32                         | 0.19                          |
| Between-race difference             | 1.21***                       | 1.64***                      |                               |
| Crime                               |                               |                              |                               |
| Male-male race                      | 0.15                          | 0.81                         | -0.66***                      |
| Female-male race                    | 0.67                          | 0.57                         | 0.10                          |
| Between-race difference             | -0.52***                      | 0.24                         |                               |
| Management                          |                               |                              |                               |
| Male-male race                      | 1.58                          | 1.38                         | 0.20                          |
| Female-male race                    | 2.47                          | 2.01                         | 0.46                          |
| Between-race difference             | -0.89***                      | -0.60**                      |                               |
| <b>Female issues</b>                |                               |                              |                               |
| Education                           |                               |                              |                               |
| Male-male race                      | 0.70                          | 0.50                         | 0.20                          |
| Female-male race                    | 2.01                          | 2.24                         | -0.23                         |
| Between-race difference             | -1.31***                      | -1.76***                     |                               |
| Social welfare                      |                               |                              |                               |
| Male-male race                      | 0.99                          | 1.66                         | -0.67***                      |
| Female-male race                    | 2.08                          | 1.61                         | 0.47*                         |
| Between-race difference             | -1.09**                       | 0.05                         |                               |
| Quality of life                     |                               |                              |                               |
| Male-male race                      | 2.10                          | 1.75                         | 0.35                          |
| Female-male race                    | 2.26                          | 2.07                         | 0.18                          |
| Between-race difference             | -0.16                         | -0.33                        |                               |
| Personal issues (family/appearance) |                               |                              |                               |
| Male-male race                      | 0.33                          | 0.41                         | -0.08                         |
| Female-male race                    | 0.80                          | 0.65                         | 0.15                          |
| Between-race difference             | -0.47**                       | -0.24                        |                               |
| <b>Female traits</b>                |                               |                              |                               |
| Male-male race                      | 1.14                          | 1.16                         | -0.02                         |
| Female-male race                    | 1.19                          | 0.84                         | 0.39                          |
| Between-race difference             | -0.05                         | 0.32                         |                               |
| <b>Male traits</b>                  |                               |                              |                               |
| Male-male race                      | 1.97                          | 2.32                         | -0.35                         |
| Female-male race                    | 1.26                          | 0.88                         | 0.38                          |
| Between-race difference             | 0.71**                        | 1.44***                      |                               |

Note: Intragender,  $N = 5,432$ ; intergender,  $N = 4,771$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Across race contexts there is, once again, no support for the hypothesis that male issues get more play in all-male races. In our four male issue areas, we find only one area of no difference in coverage (economic development), two instances where the female candidate actually gets more coverage of the traditional male issues (crime and management), and only one case where the male race seems to do better

(infrastructure/transportation). Given the inconsistency of findings, the best interpretation is that there is no difference in coverage between intergender and intragender races. Interestingly, however, there is support for the hypothesis that the presence of a female candidate changes the scope of issues covered in a campaign. We find that education and social welfare receive greater coverage in female-male races than in male-male races. And though only significant in one case, directionally we find support for the notion that male losers in intergender contests talked more about "compassion" issues than their male losers in an all-male race. This suggests that women candidates do make a difference in these campaigns by expanding the agenda to include a greater number of issues, while still focusing on the important and traditionally male issues, especially economic development, of an electoral campaign. Similarly, with regard to the personal issue hypothesis, we find no within-race differences, but we do see a between-race difference. Female eventual winners had greater media coverage of family and appearance issues than male eventual winners.

Finally, the hypothesis that male candidates receive more male trait coverage and female candidates receive more female trait coverage is not supported within race context. In both campaign contexts, female traits apply equally to both the winning and losing candidates. Likewise, in both campaign contexts, male traits apply equally to both the male and female candidate. However, it is interesting to note that an all-male race produces significantly more discussion of male traits than a female-male race generally. And when we compare the coverage of female traits to male traits for the female candidate, we see that female traits get equal coverage ( $p > .05$ , two-tailed test) as well as for the male candidate in the same-race context ( $p > .05$ , two-tailed test). However, male traits get more coverage compared to female traits in an all-male race (eventual male winner,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed test; and eventual male loser,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed test). Thus, like issues, trait coverage seems to expand to include more equal coverage of male and female characteristics when a woman is present in the race.

Our results suggest that there is little difference within race context. Candidates are generally neither advantaged nor disadvantaged because of their gender, and both winners and losers receive about the same amount of news coverage on the same issues. We did, however, find initial support that there exists some differences between races contexts. That is, intergender and intragender races produce different race coverage.

To clarify these results, we aggregated all the coverage measures to the race, as opposed to the candidate, and reran our analysis. Table 4 shows the results of these comparisons. There is strong support for our hypothesis that the presence of a female candidate expands the issue debate. When a woman was present in the race, it was more likely to include discussions of traditional female issues, especially education, as well as coverage of personal issues, and the traditional male issue of management. Moreover, we see no difference in the most popular issue in local races—economics. Races with only males or males and females equally discuss this very important local issue. Likewise, crime, a traditional male issue, is discussed equally between race contexts. In all male races, only transportation and infrastructure issues were covered more. This provides support for the notion that the presence of a female candidate overall expands the issue coverage.

We also note that across contexts the news coverage was largely the same. Papers devoted about equal coverage in terms of number of articles and overall number of words to these races regardless of the gender of the candidates involved.

To examine how this fits together in understanding how gender diversity changes the context of the campaign coverage, Table 5 shows the results of a logistic regression of how issues and traits predict type of race. Positive coefficients predict an intergender race and negative coefficients predict an intragender race. Our expectation is that an intergender race covers more issues than an intragender race. The results strengthen our argument with regard to issue coverage. Four issues (management, education, social welfare, and quality of life) were covered more often in intergender contexts. The same was true of personal, nonpolicy/campaign coverage. Only infrastructure predicted an all-male race. Meanwhile, economics and crime, two strongly traditional issues for local contexts and for men, predicted neither race. Traits showed that male races covered more male traits, but the presence of a female candidate did not lead to more coverage of traditional female traits.

### Methodological Reflection

While we examine the press separately from the campaign, it is important to recognize that research suggests that reporters follow the news story (Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin 1984). When competitive candidates campaign on specific issues, the media are likely responsive to the campaign message and are not simply responding to sex stereotypes. Yet

**Table 4**  
**t-Test of Difference in Press Issue, Candidate and Campaign Coverage by Type of Race**

|                               | Intragender Race | Intergender Race | Between-Race Difference |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Male issues</b>            |                  |                  |                         |
| Economic development          | 5.17             | 4.42             | 0.75                    |
| Infrastructure/transportation | 4.80             | 2.37             | 2.44***                 |
| Crime                         | 0.90             | 0.96             | -0.06                   |
| Management                    | 2.56             | 3.90             | -1.34***                |
| <b>Female issues</b>          |                  |                  |                         |
| Education                     | 1.05             | 3.29             | -2.24***                |
| Social welfare                | 2.37             | 3.00             | -0.63                   |
| Quality of life               | 3.31             | 3.81             | -0.50                   |
| Family/appearance             | 0.70             | 1.30             | -0.60**                 |
| <b>Traits</b>                 |                  |                  |                         |
| Female                        | 2.23             | 1.93             | 0.30                    |
| Male                          | 4.14             | 2.03             | 2.11***                 |
| <b>Candidate</b>              |                  |                  |                         |
| Average number of paragraphs  | 22.61            | 21.08            | 1.53                    |
| Average number of words       | 749.42           | 679.54           | 69.88                   |

Note: Intragender,  $N = 5,432$ ; intergender,  $N = 4,771$ .  
\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 5**  
**Logistic Regression Predicting Type of Race Based on Issue, Family/Appearance, and Trait Press Coverage**

|                               | <i>B</i>  | Standard Error |
|-------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| <b>Male issues</b>            |           |                |
| Economics                     | -0.138    | 0.100          |
| Infrastructure/transportation | -0.779*** | 0.120          |
| Crime                         | -0.118    | 0.214          |
| Management                    | 0.417***  | 0.118          |
| <b>Female issues</b>          |           |                |
| Education                     | 1.154***  | 0.160          |
| Social welfare                | 0.204*    | 0.127          |
| Quality of life               | 0.145***  | 0.114          |
| Family/appearance             | 0.434*    | 0.213          |
| <b>Traits</b>                 |           |                |
| Female                        | -0.050    | 0.143          |
| Male                          | -0.732*** | 0.125          |
| Constant                      | -0.123*** | 0.022          |

-2 log-likelihood = 13,926.807  
Percentage correctly predicted = 55.2  
Model chi-square = 174.701\*\*\*  
 $N = 10,203$

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

much of the research on the question of media bias has examined press content without consideration of how the campaign influences what reporters write

about. It may be, for example, that journalists write stories that are just an echo of the campaign. Or it may be that reporters write stories that focus on gender issues more in intergender races because they are more sensitive to the issue discussion around these issues when women are present. Or it may be that reporters write stories that focus on gender issues more in these intergender races because the candidates talk about them more and they fit gender stereotypes. This suggests that the content of news stories might be produced from an interaction between the content of the campaign and sex stereotypes. However, without knowing the dynamics of an election, which can only be captured as it plays out, the answers we and other scholars have provided are based on circumstantial evidence and do not get at the precise mechanism we are interested in determining. Future studies might want to link press coverage to campaign content to determine how the press responds to the agenda of candidates and how the gender of the candidates informs that process. With the use of the Internet as a campaign tool, candidate Web sites become an obvious place to determine candidate issue focus and a point for future research advances in this area (see Dolan 2005).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Gender bias and differences in press coverage is an important topic for two reasons. First is the simple question of fairness. From a normative perspective, media should be unbiased in the work they do covering politics so that voters can make informed, rational choices. Biased coverage may affect election outcomes given that voters rely on news media to inform them of candidates and their campaigns. Press bias may also work to reinforce gender stereotypes voters have of men and women candidates. In either case—through its effect on voters' choices or its effects on preexisting gender stereotypes—press bias or differences has the potential to limit the descriptive representation of women.

The good news is that we find little evidence of gender bias in the press coverage of mayoral campaigns within race context on issues, traits, appearance, and electability. One of the strengths of our research is that we selected cases for our study that minimized potentially confounding effects of incumbency, party, and competitiveness that have often plagued studies of national legislative or statewide executive office. When these factors are held constant,

we find no difference in press coverage. Women did not receive less news coverage relative to men in the mayoral elections we studied; nor did women receive more attention on "female" issues and less on "male" issues. Furthermore, newspaper coverage did not suggest that women were less electable than men on our electability scale. Our findings are consistent with other research showing a decline in the level of electoral disadvantage faced by women candidates, especially in fund-raising (Uhlener and Schlozman 1986; Mandel 1981; Baxter and Lansing 1980).

Where we do see important differences, however, are across race contexts, suggesting that the presence of a woman on the ballot tends to enhance the salience of female or compassion issues, alter coverage of candidates' personality traits, and increase overall coverage of nonpolicy family and appearance coverage. This latter finding on personal coverage is in contrast to research at the legislative, state executive, and presidential level that shows a consistent difference between male and female candidates on this dimension (Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001; Devitt 2002; Banwart, Bystrom, and Robertson 2003; Aday and Devitt 2001; Heith 2001; Heldman, Carroll, and Olson 2005). This suggests that these local races might be different on this dimension when compared to top-of-the-ballot officeholders. In these contests, the candidates' proximity to the local media and their personal knowledge of the candidates and families may lead to less bias on this dimension.

Broadly speaking, the issue expansion finding we see is particularly important because it suggests the presence of a female candidate enhances representation as the scope and depth of issue discussion is much greater, providing more issue options for voters to consider in making their vote choice. In addition, research on campaign effects suggests that competitive women candidates lead to greater political engagement by female citizens (Atkeson 2003). One source of such increased engagement might be the expanded issue debate. This finding suggests this mechanism as one possibility.

An alternative interpretation of our findings is that women candidates actually need to be better than their male opponents, especially in the area of electability and experience. To hold constant a variety of factors in our design, all of our female candidates were eventual winners, but in examining our data across intergender and intragender contests, we see that for one measure of electability and our experience measure that the male eventual winner in the all-male race is actually favored compared to the female

eventual winner in the intergender race. Considering the evidence in this way suggests that bias in some areas is still present. Given the importance of experience and electability to a candidate's success, these differences need to be explored further.

Though some may question our results because of their local character, we argue that our design provides strong evidence that the press treats candidates within race context similarly. In addition, our work on mayoral campaigns expands the type of elections examined on this question, which helps to understand the limits of particular settings and raises interesting questions. For example, comparing the extensive work on female presidential candidate Elizabeth Dole with what we find here raises a series of interesting questions about how context may alter press biases. Did the fact that Dole was considered one of the first viable women to run for the presidency lead to greater amounts of "gender" coverage? Comparing Dole's presidential bid with Hillary Clinton's presidential bid will help to answer this question. Alternatively, maybe media outlet matters. Much work on candidate Dole relied on prestige or national press organizations (e.g., the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, etc.), whereas our study uses state or local press organizations. Research suggests that there are differences in reporting between these two entities (Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin 2003), which possibly could account for differences we see here. Or perhaps the office itself is an important explanatory variable. Mayoral contexts may be more accepting of female candidates than other contexts because of the larger and longer presence of female elected leaders in city government.

### Notes

1. We do not mean to suggest that partisanship is never a factor, even in cities with nonpartisan ballots (Kaufmann 2004). Nevertheless, we do suggest that it lessens the temptation of reporters to frame elections in terms of Democratic and Republican Party platforms.

2. Interestingly, the differences in candidates' issue coverage did not reflect differences in the kinds of campaigns run by men and women, as measured by candidates' advertising. Women presented themselves on issues in a far more balanced way than the coverage indicated. The more intense coverage of female gubernatorial candidates' traits tended to reflect these candidates' tendencies to stress traits in their campaign ads (see Kahn 1994a).

3. See Center for American Women and Politics (2006).

4. We defined competitive as having either a primary or general election outcome within a 10 percent margin.

5. Eastern cities were excluded because of the prominent use of partisan ballots in this region. Because the vast majority of

cities employ nonpartisan ballots, we argue that excluding cities in this region is justified.

6. We did not code letters to the editor because they were not written by journalists.

7. We also included other minorities (gays/lesbians, and in the case of Cleveland, Muslims) and women in our scheme. If news coverage indicated geographic areas within a city known to be enclaves for particular groups, we coded this accordingly. For example, if candidate X is doing well on the city's eastside, and if the eastside is predominantly black, we coded as gaining ground among black residents.

8. We excluded Sacramento cases from this analysis because there was no mention of primary results during the general election. This is odd, but we believe it is likely because of the large time gap of eight months between the primary and general election campaign.

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