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An Analysis of Utah Media: Women & Politics

As women's political presence and influence have slowly continued to increase, the way they have been represented in the media has also evolved. Research spanning the past several decades indicates that women politicians continue to be disadvantaged in the way they are covered by the media.¹ From newspapers to primetime television, the way female political candidates are represented is a crucial topic; recent research indicates that women are dissuaded from even entering the political realm due to patterns of gendered media reporting and that "media both produces and reproduces sexism."² Research evaluating media representation of female political candidates spans both the quantity and quality of coverage,³ including "volume of coverage, candidates' viability, candidates' issues, and candidates' traits."⁴ To date, however, there has been no specific research conducted in Utah on the intersection between media, gender, and politics.

Setting the Stage

During the summer of 2020, UWLP researchers collected data from current and former female elected officials to learn more about the experiences of Utah women who served in elected public office.⁵ The January 2021 report that summarized the results—Perceptions of Women Elected Officials in Utah: Challenges, Benefits, and Lessons Learned—focused on the challenges of running for and serving in public office. To build on that previous study and to better understand how women running for office were represented in Utah media, UWLP researchers collected news articles on women in Utah running for or holding political office. A random sampling was collected from Utah's four major newspapers—*The Deseret News* and *The Salt Lake Tribune* in Salt Lake County, the *Standard-Examiner* in Weber County, and *The Daily Herald* in Utah County—to evaluate media coverage of female candidates in political campaigns from 1995 to 2020.

The study focused on female political candidates within the State of Utah who have run for the following elected offices: Congress, Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Utah Senate, Utah House of Representatives, and Mayor. News articles were analyzed and coded using categories identified by national research on political media coverage to determine trends and patterns within Utah's media. A limitation of this research is that it did not include a comparative analysis of media focused on Utah men running for elective public office. However, each section does provide a comparison with other studies that have done so. The results presented here are ordered according to the frequency the topic was mentioned: candidate's background, viability, general tone, mention of gender, leadership traits, masculine versus feminine issues, family life, masculine versus feminine traits, physical appearance,

personality traits, sexist comments, and level of government. The brief will conclude with a summary of findings and recommendations for Utah media.

Candidate's Background

Of the 383 articles identified for analysis, 195 (50.9%) mentioned some aspect of the candidate's background, such as professional experience and history, credentials, education, degrees held, political experience, or other non-family-related personal history. Nearly all articles included some discussion of a candidate's political history, including positions held, issues, projects, or policies they had supported, and the length and success of their political involvement. Professional background and accomplishments were also regularly included, as was whether the candidates held a college degree, particularly if the candidate held an advanced degree. The candidate's religious affiliation was mentioned only when the candidate was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; this affiliation was characterized both positively and negatively, depending on the article's author.

Of note, three candidates in this study—Olene Walker, Enid Greene Mickelsen (formerly Enid Greene Waldholtz), and Mia Love—received a disproportionate volume of reporting on their backgrounds and family lives. The three had a good portion of their life stories displayed in the media. While coverage was often in a positive light, it was uneven in terms of detail compared to coverage of other candidates, female or male. General research on media coverage of female candidates has shown that women more often receive coverage that focuses on their background, family life, personality, and viability than coverage of men does.⁶

Viability – Horse Race Coverage

Viability, or "horse race coverage," was also examined. Viability has long been one of the most prominent elements of campaign coverage, and it centers around whether the candidate can stay in the race, what the candidate's chances are of winning, and how she or he is faring during the election campaign. It offers a general discourse about the political race, including the media's attempt to predict the outcome.

Of the 383 articles, 148 (38.6%) included some aspect of horse race coverage. Many comments were neutrally stated, giving mere percentages or specific point gaps for the candidates. Others described a candidate's "ride to election" going "very smoothly"⁷ or other candidates being "shoo-ins,"⁸ or yet another candidate being "outpaced"⁹ by an opponent. Much less frequently, media coverage used more descriptive words, such as a candidate's being "clobbered"¹⁰ or "knocked

off”¹¹ by another in their “battle”¹² for office. The articles regularly disclosed how much money candidates had raised or used for their campaigns—funds referred to as war chests. Typically, the bigger the war chest is, the greater a candidate’s likelihood of being successfully elected is. Researchers¹³ have historically noted that news media has tended to emphasize women candidates’ lack of viability, focusing more attention on the “horse race” aspects of their campaigns.

General Tone

The articles were evaluated for tone to determine whether candidates received either a negative or positive portrayal. Of the 383 articles, 136 (35.5%) were tagged for using phrases and words that portrayed the candidate positively, while 119 (31.1%) were tagged for using phrases and words that portrayed the candidate negatively. If the candidate was running a negative campaign, the media focused more on her negativity. Likewise, a positive campaign resulted in a more positive focus. Interestingly, the media’s coverage of one politician was largely positive when she replaced an elected official who left office voluntarily; however, when she announced her candidacy in running for re-election, the media comments assumed a more critical tone. Some female candidates seemed to attract more media coverage than others.

Negative comments by the media toward women may be attributed to the fact that men have historically constituted the vast majority of political leaders, and, consequently, leadership qualities have been subscribed to men. When women step into political leadership, it does not match the stereotypical view of either a leader or a woman, and the result is women may receive more negative coverage. An example of this double bind is described by a female politician in one of the articles: “When women are placed in a leadership position, we tend to expect her to be tough. However, if she’s too tough she seems ‘witchy.’ But she can’t be too soft, because then she gets labeled as ‘not tough enough for the job.’”¹⁴ This aligns with research that finds “the perceived characteristics of women . . . are at odds with the requirements of political leadership. . . . The consequence is that women leaders inevitably fail on some standard, because they either violate the stereotype of a leader or that of a woman. This can lead to negative evaluations and reporting by journalists if they (consciously or not) adhere to the prescriptive stereotypes.”¹⁵

Mention of Gender

One-third (33.4%) of all articles called out the candidate’s gender (128 out of 383). Even when earlier coverage of the candidate had included gender in an article, newspapers continued to mention gender. A classic example was found in the opening line of one article which noted the obvious—that in a mayoral primary election featuring two female candidates, the winner “will be a woman.”¹⁶

Nearly one-quarter (24.5%) of gender references (94 of 383) highlighted the historic nature of a female candidate running

or holding office in Utah’s male-dominated politics. Michelle Kaufusi was referred to as “Provo’s first female mayor”¹⁷ and “the only woman to hold that office in Provo’s 157 years of existence.”¹⁸ Olene Walker, who ran for re-election as Utah state governor, was described as a “woman political pioneer”¹⁹ after serving as “Utah’s first woman governor.”²⁰ Mia Love, who served in the US House of Representatives from 2014–2019, received an intersectional lens in coverage; she was often referred to as the “first black Republican woman elected to Congress,”²¹ highlighting both her race and gender.

In some instances, newspaper commentary suggested that being a woman would increase electability. One candidate was described as the “complete package,”²² in part due to her gender, while another was spoken of as bringing gender balance²³ when campaigning with a male candidate. The decision to repeatedly point out gender underscores the perceived rarity of female politicians in Utah while potentially minimizing their capabilities, experience, and knowledge.

Published research suggests that male candidates are far less likely than female candidates to be referenced by their gender or by “novelty labels” such as “first” or “lone,” because men are accepted as the norm within politics, while women are seen at best as historic figures—or at worse as abnormal. Researchers noted that novelty labeling, whether positive or negative, underscores and accentuates the gender differences in a political race rather than highlighting a candidate’s experiences, leadership, and viewpoints.²⁴

Leadership Traits

Articles were analyzed to determine whether candidates were described in terms of their leadership traits. According to the literature, “leadership traits are those character traits in politicians that are important for voters when they cast their ballot.”²⁵ Such traits include competence, integrity, empathy, charisma, compassion, leadership, aggressiveness, political skills, vigorousness, communicative skills, and consistency.

Over a quarter (26.4%, 101 of 383) of the articles ascribed leadership traits to female candidates, often highlighting these traits in general terms, describing a candidate as a “tremendous leader,”²⁶ “a real leader with natural leadership skills,”²⁷ and as one who “demonstrated the leadership.”²⁸ Highlighting a candidate’s vigorousness (effort, energy, or excitement) was also frequently mentioned. Candidates were said to have “proven their mettle”²⁹ in a race, while others “demonstrated incredible courage and moxie.”³⁰ Integrity and values-related traits were often used to characterize a candidate’s leadership qualities and included having “unquestionable character,”³¹ “being ‘principled,’”³² and willing “to do the right thing.”³³

Other notable traits included competence, describing how a female candidate was “prepared”³⁴ or knew how to “get things done,”³⁵ and citing a candidate’s political skills, such as knowing how to “hammer out a budget”³⁶ or her “ability to work across the aisle.”³⁷ Candidates’ aggressive or tough

characteristics were generally portrayed as positive leadership qualities. A candidate was “not afraid to make tough calls,”³⁸ while another could go “toe to toe”³⁹ on issues. Interestingly, one candidate was referred to as “tough and loveable,”⁴⁰ which highlights the possibility that female candidates may experience additional pressure to be likeable in order to be seen as viable political leaders.

Overall, recent research⁴¹ confirms that male politicians receive more media coverage describing their leadership traits, highlighting both traditionally masculine characteristics (e.g., political craftsmanship and vigorousness) and feminine ones (e.g., communicative skills and integrity).

Masculine versus Feminine Issues

In the literature, “compassion issues” have been referred to as feminine issues that focus on people-related topics such as poverty, education, healthcare, childcare, the environment, social issues (including LGBTQ issues), and issues related to women’s experiences (e.g., abortion, violence against women/domestic violence, gender quotas). Conversely, masculine issues focus on what are perceived to be “tough issues,” such as foreign policy, foreign affairs, natural resources, armed forces/military, budget & finances, taxes, and the economy.⁴² Researchers have reported that coverage of political candidates’ policies and issues correspond to men’s and women’s stereotypical traits, including the ones just mentioned.⁴³ In addition, studies have shown the issues that the media covers during campaigns change if candidates are all men, as opposed to mixed-gender races.⁴⁴

In the Utah sample, feminine issues were reported more than twice as frequently as masculine issues in relation to the female candidates: 93 articles (24.3%) highlighted feminine issues, whereas 42 (11.0%) noted masculine issues. Among the former, pre-K through university-level education emerged as the strongest theme, followed by healthcare, childcare, and environmental issues. Masculine issues emphasized finances, particularly the candidates’ intentions to balance the budget within their potential offices and to reduce debts.

Family Life

Articles were examined to see whether the media reported on the family life of female candidates, including the mention of marital status, spouse, children, or extended family-related responsibilities/activities. Nearly a quarter (24.3%, 93 of 383) referenced family life. Female politicians were frequently ascribed caregiving roles, particularly as a mother and/or grandmother. References to family life also included childhood backgrounds and marriage stories. Often such references showcased an unconventional path into politics, such as their careers being “less intentional”⁴⁵ or occurring after “the last of five children had just entered pre-school.”⁴⁶

While it was common for the number of dependents to be disclosed, family life coverage also included feature articles about a candidate’s spouse, emphasizing the unconventionality of a woman/mom/wife in the starring political role and speculating about how family dynamics worked when the mother

or grandmother was fulfilling professional duties. One article shared how often a politician was expected to be home and quoted the husband as he described how she juggled work and caregiving by checking “in with her children on FaceTime.”⁴⁷ Other articles jested about which titles the husbands should use as their wives took office, with one article specifically asking a spouse how he felt about being called the “First Man.”⁴⁸

Again, we did not perform the same analysis for male candidates, but the literature confirms that news media more frequently report female candidates’ personal information, including marital and parental coverage, while male candidates are more likely to be described in terms of their occupation, experience, or accomplishments rather than their family life.⁴⁹

Masculine versus Feminine Traits

Academic researchers⁵⁰ have classified traits of political candidates as either feminine (i.e., honest, non-competitive, emotional, weak leader, or compassionate) or masculine (i.e., self-confident, strong leader, unemotional, ambitious, and tough). Of the 383 Utah articles, 58 (15.1%) referred to feminine traits, the most frequent being caring, compassionate, kind, and friendly. Other articles used words that conveyed subtle images of weakness, such as a candidate being diminutive or having a “bleeding heart.”⁵¹ Forty-two (11.0%) referred to the candidates possessing various masculine traits. Of these, some facet of intelligence was most often referenced. Words such as smart, articulate, bright, and intelligent were frequently used and often coupled with the candidates’ advanced degrees and/or accomplishments. Tough was another masculine trait often used to describe these women, though this term was used in both positive as well as negative ways. Being tough was positive when linked with strong leadership ability; however, when used within the context of being aggressive, being tough was portrayed negatively.

When a candidate demonstrated emotionality, the Utah media called it out, often in a way that suggested women need to “bottle” their emotions and “bury” themselves in their work to be “tough” enough.⁵² One candidate was described as “disastrously weepy” and “unwitting.”⁵³ It was noted that more articles spanning 1995–2005 included references to the possibility of female candidates being “too nice for the job”⁵⁴ or describing them as kind, humble, caring, and tough only when absolutely necessary. During this timeframe, Olene Walker received a disproportionate amount of gendered scrutiny by the media. One article reported that “reaching grandmother status and moving past menopause don’t relegate a woman to a life of playing bingo at the senior center and booking cruises on the Princess Line.”⁵⁵ Another noted: “Her grandmotherly image is something she has to overcome. We think of grandmothers as not getting into fights and politics is a fight, it’s a battle, and not all women can do it. Not all men can do it. What Olene has to accomplish is being tough without losing her femininity.”⁵⁶ This comment, made by a male political colleague, hits at the heart of a long-held societal

belief that women cannot be tough (or strong) and feminine at the same time. Yet even Walker's (then) young granddaughter understood the disparity in this assumption, apparently reprimanding a reporter who asked her if her grandmother was "tough enough for the job" by replying that "just because she [was] a girl" didn't mean she "couldn't handle it."⁵⁷

Physical Appearance

The physical appearance of female candidates has long been a topic of discussion. Jeannette Rankin was the first female elected to the US House of Representatives in 1916 and was judged by her appearance before she even had a chance to establish her policy or political ideals.⁵⁸ Within our sampling of Utah media, physical appearance was identified in 52 articles (13.6%), with a woman's clothing, age, and race mentioned most frequently. There were also references to her shoes, hair, makeup, height, weight, physical fitness, physical beauty or attractiveness, and looking tired, stressed, or energized. Unfortunately, the data suggest that the physical appearance of female candidates is still a criterion on which the media chooses to focus. This is relevant because the media's choice to ignore or elaborate on a candidate's physical appearance can inform the way voters evaluate a candidate.

For example, the media questioned a candidate's potential effectiveness based on her physical appearance: "But what about image—the image, upon first glance, of a kindly 72-year-old who is generous with hugs and quick to smile? Does [she] have the chutzpah to be [elected]?"⁵⁹ Comments such as these delegitimize women and perpetuate the problem that women are often held to a different standard than their male counterparts. Although we did not compare these findings in this study with how Utah media wrote about male candidates, studies have found that female candidates receive more media attention about their appearance than their male counterparts, which has a cumulative effect that may weaken the public's view of the candidate and reinforce stereotypes.⁶⁰

Personality Traits

Within this study's context, personality traits were defined as characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Examples include being confident, straightforward, pleasant, aggressive, competent, charismatic, open, and hard-working. Personality traits were mentioned in 46 articles (12.0%). Candidates running for office were described using words such as "energy and passion,"⁶¹ "friendliness and enthusiasm,"⁶² "persistence"⁶³ and "spunky"⁶⁴—words more often associated with females rather than males. Focusing on a female candidate's style and personal attributes, while not providing comparable assessments of male candidates, diminishes how women are perceived, while ignoring their substance and leadership abilities.

Several articles relied on stereotypical personality traits associated with women and emphasized the differences between female and male candidates, frequently replacing discussions

about the candidates' position on policies or current issues with superficial remarks. One candidate was described as "a nice lady" who had "class and style,"⁶⁵ someone whom people would look at and say, "We want someone like that because she represents Utah families."⁶⁶ Comments such as these fail to convey the candidate's abilities as a leader and tend to reinforce stereotypes based on the candidate's gender.

In our sample, the absence of listing female candidates' qualifications made their accomplishments seem astonishing and created almost a sense of disbelief over their abilities. Examples include: "Unscripted and spontaneous, she surprised critics and supporters alike with her ability to play hardball politics with lawmakers,"⁶⁷ or "Leadership was impressed with her grasp of the state budget and her charm while setting out her agenda."⁶⁸ The focus on a woman's personality traits failed to provide substantive information on how they would lead or whether they were qualified. Ultimately, this type of media coverage creates a disparity in how female and male candidates are perceived.

According to researchers, "The coverage of personality traits is particularly important to the success of a campaign, as stereotypical male traits tend to be associated with leadership competency, and voters tend to view these traits as more important for a candidate than stereotypical female traits."⁶⁹ Overall, voters choose leaders who appear confident and match iconic images of previous leaders. Since men have largely held these leadership roles, voters are inclined to stick with what they know and continue to ascribe masculine personality traits to political leaders.⁷⁰

Sexist Comments

Sexist comments include language that judges people by their gender when their gender does not matter, or that suggests that one sex is superior to the other. Word choices can affect voters' attitudes toward female candidates. Media coverage of female politicians that uses language focused on subtler forms of sexist language—ambitious, feisty, compassionate, first woman, or work-life balance—reinforces gender stereotypes, and women tend to be seen as either ice queens, grandmas, mothers, or "steel in a velvet glove."⁷¹ Researchers have found that these types of comments reduce a female candidate's credibility, respectability, and likeability.⁷²

Forty-three articles (11.2%) in our sample included sexist comments. One article queried whether a "5-foot 7 dynamo [was] up to the job."⁷³ Another quoted a female politician recalling a male colleague asking, "What's a nice woman like you doing worrying about money?"⁷⁴ She shared with the reporter, "I almost laid him low. But I saw a third of the men ducking their heads, so I just said, 'With what you're presenting, some of us nice women have to worry about money.'"⁷⁵

Because of the rarity of women in Utah politics, there were many "first woman in politics" comments. For example, "The important thing about [this candidate] is not her gender, it's the kind of woman she is. I don't think I'd be excited about

[just] any woman. But I'm excited about this woman."⁷⁶ A reporter in a 2003 article challenged the public not to measure a candidate by "the important 'first woman' details: Did she cry under pressure? Can she balance her job and breast-feeding? Do her shoes match her dress? Did she properly blot her lipstick?"⁷⁷ Instead, the reporter called out that phrases such as these would reinforce stereotypes, emphasizing that Utah "firsts" present an opportunity for Utahns to shift their paradigm and see possibilities outside of the norm.

Level of Government

In Utah, it is rare for female politicians to hold either national or statewide office. One article quoted a male politician who said, "Women are even more scarce on Utah's Capitol Hill than Democrats."⁷⁸ Currently, there are no female members of the 117th Congress. While women currently serve in Utah's state legislature, they fill less than a quarter of these positions (25 of 104).

The research sample revealed that female candidates running for higher level political offices, such as Congress, Governor, Lieutenant Governor, or Mayor in the most populous counties received greater coverage in terms of both quantity and thoroughness of coverage. The female candidates in national and in two mayoral offices (Salt Lake City and Provo) appeared more often in Utah newspaper articles than female candidates who were running for a state legislative office, even though the latter had a greater number of women candidates.

Data Summary

Table 1 provides an overview of the media coverage across Utah's four major newspaper outlets.

Table 1. Utah Media Coverage of Women Political Candidates

Topic	Mentioned in # of Articles	Percentage of Articles
Background	195	50.9%
Viability/Horse Race Coverage	148	38.6%
General Tone – Positive	136	35.5%
Mention of Gender	128	33.4%
General Tone – Negative	119	31.1%
Leadership Traits	101	26.4%
Feminine Issues	93	24.3%
Family Life	93	24.3%
Feminine Traits	58	15.1%
Physical Appearance	52	13.6%
Personality Traits	46	12.0%
Sexist Comments	43	11.2%
Masculine Issues	42	11.0%
Masculine Traits	42	11.0%

Insights and Recommendations

The amount of gender bias and types of media coverage received by female politicians is an important topic, particularly in our current political climate, when voters rely on media as their primary source of political information. This underscores how "disadvantageous reporting by media can hurt the electoral chances of women candidates and threaten the political longevity of sitting women politicians."⁷⁹

The findings of this research are consistent with prior research and show how Utah's media has represented female politicians, which can intentionally or unintentionally reinforce gender bias and stereotypes that disadvantage women in politics. Again, researchers did not specifically compare the media representation with male candidates in Utah, but instead compared with existing literature. Because no other statewide studies of this kind have been found, we are not able to compare how Utah news media compares to media in other states in terms of any topic included in this analysis. However, this study can help Utah residents and media become more aware of potential gendered language that could negatively impact, even subtly, women candidates since "leadership" is still viewed by most people as a masculine trait or activity.

Based on these findings, the following areas are offered as opportunities to provide more equitable and representational media coverage for Utah's women politicians:

- Increase the media coverage of female state legislators, thus helping to normalize women holding political office.
- Consider steering away from writing about any candidate's appearance.
- Be more aware of sexist language in reporting and take active measures to normalize women in leadership, particularly women of color.
- Treat genders equally in terms of focusing on the candidates' positions, qualifications, and contributions rather than their personal and family lives and non-political backgrounds.
- Highlight female candidates' leadership traits in a way that acknowledges their leadership capabilities.
- Take thoughtful measures to portray each candidate, woman or man, as an individual, not as a gender.

Conclusion

Women in Utah who run for office will continue to face challenges. Utah's media are in a unique position to ensure societal and cultural stereotypes are not perpetuated. As a result, the words used to describe female candidates are of paramount importance and should be thoughtfully and intentionally crafted. It is in Utah's best interest that we prepare and support more women in political leadership positions and provide more equitable and representational media coverage for these women. As noted by Sheryl Allen, a former state legislator from Davis County, "women have a different per-

spective. And, if we're going to get good government, we need a diversity of opinion and expertise to make the type of government the public wants and deserves."⁸⁰ Utahns need more women to run and serve in elected posts at all levels of government, and the research is clear that as we do so, we can lift all Utah residents and the state as a whole.

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