

CRACKS IN THE GLASS CEILING

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Leela Schooler

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Leela Schooler

Thesis Supervisor:

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Dr. Kym Fox,  
School of Journalism and Mass  
Communication

Approved:

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Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.  
Dean, Honors College

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## **Abstract:**

Bias against female political candidates has been a hot-button issue, especially during and after the 2016 election, and the media is not exempt from being a part of the discussion. The overall question that this article proposes is whether there is a definitive bias against female political candidates in the media based on gender. More specifically, if there is a definitive bias, at what levels of government is it seen and felt the most? These questions are explored through peer-reviewed research and interviews with political researchers, educators and candidates themselves on how they feel the media portrays female candidates. These candidates include Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, Wendy Davis, and Celia Israel. The article concludes in agreement with the research that there is a definitive bias against female candidates in the media. This bias is more present in higher offices like president of the United States and governor than it is with congress and legislature positions. What this article does is bring together existing research to paint a bigger picture on how the media effects the image of female candidates for voters. Having a bigger picture on this topic can help decide where future research is focused further pinpoint the issues that female candidates deal with.

## **Cracks in the Glass Ceiling**

The idea of the glass ceiling was brought to the forefront in the 2016 election when Hillary Clinton was running for the office of the President of the United States. While it was not the first time that Clinton ran, it was certainly the closest that she had gotten to breaking the glass ceiling for the most powerful position: leader of the free world.

In 2008, Clinton ran in the Democratic primary against President Barack Obama. After Obama won the nomination, Clinton talked about the glass ceiling and how hard it is to break the ceiling for the highest office in the United States.

“Although we weren’t able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time,” Clinton said in her concession speech. “Thanks to you, it’s got about 18 million cracks in it.”

These cracks, however, were not enough to break the ceiling in 2016. Clinton won the Democratic primary, adding even more cracks to the ceiling, but it wasn’t enough, with Clinton losing to Donald Trump in the electoral college, despite winning the popular vote by almost 3 million votes.

Many researchers and subsequent studies have looked at what could be standing in between women and the office of the President of the United States. Many studies focus on the media coverage that female political candidates receive during elections. While media is not the only aspect of a campaign, it can affect how the audience sees a candidate.

This article takes a look at how the media frames female candidates – not only Clinton and the presidency, but other candidates and levels of government as well – and studies the effects that this has on the campaigns and the candidates themselves. Through the research and interviews, it asks the questions: What effect does the media have? Is it standing between women and the glass ceiling in political offices?

### **Hillary Clinton: The Other Woman**



In 2016, Hillary Clinton came the closest that any female had ever come to winning the White House. Through her time as First Lady, as a senator of New York and her experience campaigning in other elections, she was hailed as the most qualified candidate for the job by many. But that is not what the media focused on.

In fact, there were many times that the news cycle did not focus on her at all. Instead, according to Clinton in her autobiography “What Happened”, it usually involved

the new controversial thing that her opponent, Donald Trump, had tweeted earlier that morning.

But when the news did focus on Clinton, it tended to focus on her scandals. The Knight Foundation released a report in 2017 that found the coverage on Clinton's scandals, like the fact that she used a private email server during her time as Secretary of State, were very focused. Coverage on Trump's scandals, however, like when he mocked a disabled reporter and when he refused to release his tax returns, had less focused coverage than Clinton.

"Clinton's controversies got more attention than Trump's (19 percent versus 15 percent) and were more focused," Thomas Peterson, author of the study, wrote.

Blake Farrar, a political science lecturer at Texas State University, thinks part of the reason that focusing on the email scandal worked so well is because of the double standard that is present for male and female candidates.

"We kind of expect men to be a little untrustworthy, whereas women, we're wanting to be perfect," Farrar said. "So, I think it was very effective to undercut her in the campaign by going after the emails."

According to Peterson, the media and what it focused on during the election was negatively biased against Hillary Clinton. Even though Trump had scandals of his own, it was Clinton's that got more coverage, with less coverage of her stance on issues.

"Clinton's alleged scandals accounted for 16 percent of her coverage—four times the amount of press attention paid to Trump's treatment of women and 16 times the

amount of news coverage given to Clinton’s most heavily covered policy position,” Peterson said in the Knight Foundation report.

But the 2016 election was only the latest instance of how the media has covered Clinton in campaigns. Clinton also ran for president in 2008, losing in the primaries to Barack Obama, who would become president.

Diana Carlin and Kelly Winfrey, both from the University of Kansas, studied the media coverage of both Clinton and Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin in 2008, researching the coverage through the lens of female stereotypes developed by Rosabeth Moss Kanter in her book “Women of the Corporation” about the corporate workplace. The stereotypes – seductress, mother, pet and iron maiden – are stereotypes that are effectively used to frame Clinton in media coverage, Carlin and Winfrey stated in their report.

According to Carlin and Winfrey, Clinton faced sexism by the media during her campaign, even in something as seemingly harmless as calling her by her first name.

“As a culture we have developed certain linguistic social recognitions of respect and status,” they state in their report. “Women are often stripped of this sort of recognition and respect when strangers, acquaintances, subordinates, or media commentators call them by their first name but don’t do the same for males.”

This was not the only aspect of the media coverage of course. Carlin and Winfrey note in that many female candidates are sexualized or objectified in the media. The way that Clinton dressed and how she presented herself were often the subject of conversation, and people often criticized her – and her pantsuits – as not being feminine

enough. But it doesn't mean that the stereotype of seductress wasn't used against her. It was used in a different way – in the form of Monica Lewinsky, the intern that Bill Clinton admitted to having an affair with during his time in the Oval Office.

Chris Matthews, host of “Hardball with Chris Matthews” on MSNBC, was one of many who took digs at Clinton about Lewinsky.

“The reason (Clinton) is a U.S. Senator, the reason she's a candidate for president, the reason she may be a front-runner is her husband messed around,” Matthews said on his show during the primary race.

Matthews' remarks are just one instance of Lewinsky being used against Hillary Clinton. News anchors, memes and social media comments alike associated her with Lewinsky throughout both of her presidential campaigns. Whether they were blaming her for her husband's transgressions, or simply trying to distract from the original topic of discussion, the comments and jokes tended to be sexual in nature. Even in 2016, Clinton couldn't seem to get away from it. Even though the incident was not actually her indiscretion to answer for, she was still expected to answer for it.

Another stereotype that Clinton faced was that of iron maiden. The media focused on her looks and wardrobe, criticizing her for not being feminine enough. The adjectives that Carlin and Winfrey found used in the media to describe her made her seem cold and emotionless, which people considered to be un-feminine. Even when Clinton showed emotion, she was still criticized.

During the 2008 election, Clinton held a campaign event at a coffee shop in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. There was an interview at the event where she got emotional, surprising many.

“When Clinton nearly cried in New Hampshire when asked how she did it every day, the incident grabbed headlines and was reported as breaking news largely because it went against the tough image Clinton projected,” Carlin and Winfrey wrote in their analysis.

While her image was still an aspect in the 2016 election, the issue that held the headlines was the one of Clinton’s emails. Multiple investigations found it was not a crime for Clinton to use a private email server while she was Secretary of State, but that didn’t stop the media from covering the situation. In fact, many news outlets ran segments with a narrative that Clinton was guilty and deserved to go to jail. Donald Trump continuously brought it up at his rallies and on Twitter, keeping the narrative going.

Just days before the 2016 election, James Comey, then the director of the FBI, announced that the FBI was looking into more emails from Clinton’s private server. Nothing was found in the emails, but the damage was done. Many media outlets, including MSNBC and even Vanity Fair, debated whether the move made by Comey contributed to Clinton’s loss in the electoral college.

## Sarah Palin: Caribou Barbie



While a woman has yet to break the glass ceiling into the presidency, the vice presidency has also never had the glass ceiling broken. The last time that a woman got close to filling that office was in 2008, when Senator John McCain announced his running mate, Sarah Palin.

Palin was the governor of Alaska at the time and brought a younger energy to the candidacy, according to Carlin and Winfrey. Cable news outlets immediately latched onto this, fitting her quickly into gendered boxes.

As a mother of five children, the youngest an infant with special needs, the question immediately became how she could be a mother and the vice president. The fact that she was running the state of Alaska as governor, giving her experience in an executive position, took a back seat to her role as a mother. When it was announced that Bristol Palin, the 17-year-old daughter of Palin, was pregnant, the conversation only became more pronounced.

Farrar, lecturer at Texas State University, thinks that the factors of her being a mother with young children, as well as the focus on that, was harmful to Palin.

“The focus on her family. They just kept on it,” Farrar said. “Stereotyping her into certain issues, and special needs kind of became the big issue for that campaign.”

As much as she fell into the motherhood stereotype, she also fell into the seductress stereotype. The fact that she was more feminine than Clinton was appealing to a lot of people. Because her clothes were slightly more feminine, and her skirts just a little tighter, people sexualized her on a regular basis.

“Emphasis on (Palin’s) physical appearance began when news sources revealed she had participated in the beauty pageants,” Carlin and Winfrey said in their research. “Palin’s pageant past was used to dismiss her as a serious candidate.”

The way that Palin was framed by the media was complex and, at times, paradoxical. Even when Palin would say something that most would consider ridiculous, or things that were obviously false – like her saying that she could see Russia from her backyard – people made it about her gender. Instead of simply questioning her

statements, everyone from MSNBC to the Daily Show used the information to frame her as a dumb woman.

It wasn't because of her policies, or her character that people couldn't see her as vice president. It was because her kids were too young, or that she was too vain from participating in beauty pageants.

### **Wendy Davis: Abortion Barbie**



Gender bias is also present in the race for Texas governor, including in 2014, when Wendy Davis ran against Gov. Greg Abbott.

Davis became a popular name in politics while she was still serving as a senator in the Texas Legislature. In 2012, she filibustered a bill that would put restrictions on abortions clinics in Texas, that the Supreme Court would later classify as undue restrictions. Davis was successful in her filibuster, but the bill passed in a special session

a few weeks later. When Davis ran in 2014 for governor, her filibuster was the main focus in the media.

Davis opened up about her own abortion, and right-wing media sites jumped on this, continuously calling her “Abortion Barbie.” Redstate.com titled an article about Davis, “Abortion Barbie is back, and has more dumb things to say.”

Celia Israel D-Austin, a representative in the Texas Legislature, believes that being labeled into one issue harmed Davis, especially with the issue of abortion in Texas.

“To be called ‘Abortion Barbie’ was something that stuck, and then the media was quick to repeat it,” Israel said. “Wendy’s opponents were effective in characterizing her as a single-issue person, and she never broke loose from that.”

Farrar, political science lecturer, believes that it wasn’t just pushing her into one issue, but also pushing her into an issue that is primarily perceived as a women’s issue.

“What was the issue that catapulted her into the spotlight? Women’s reproduction,” Farrar said.

Despite the media and opponents trying to keep Davis on the issue of abortion, her campaign actually focused on other issues, like voting laws and other aspects of healthcare.

The way the media framed Davis was harmful, especially in Texas and how she was perceived as a candidate. Media, especially conservative media, could not mention her without demeaning her or labeling her. By doing this, it effected how people saw her.

## Celia Israel



"I think it's always gonna be a challenge for women to be heard, whether it's in a conference room or in an issue-driven press conference." Celia Israel (D), Texas State Representative.

When it comes to Texas Legislature, the media bias against women tends to be less obvious.

Texas House Representative Celia Israel, D-Austin, said that she has not experienced any bias in the media because of her gender.

"I don't think (there's a bias), not on the media coverage," Israel said. "I think the media's been receptive to me and to my message."

Israel's experience matches a study conducted by Lesley Lavery, assistant professor at Macalester College in Minnesota. Lavery's study looks at the coverage of male and female U.S. House candidates.

While Lavery's study focuses on U.S. House Representatives, its data suggests that more localized elections, like state legislature races, have less bias because of the type of mediums that cover the candidates.

"When news coverage is examined at the candidate level, no gender differences in the amount of coverage are apparent," Lavery said in her analysis.

The lack of coverage that more local candidates tend to get compared to presidential and gubernatorial candidates can be a factor in this difference from bias in other levels of government.

"By 2002, in both local television news and newspapers, women were receiving equitable amounts of coverage," Lavery said in the study.

While noting her own experience, Israel said that it is still hard for women in politics in general.

"Sometimes you have to speak a little louder and raise your profile so that the media will say, 'Oh yeah, she's smart, she's saying something. Let's interview her,'" she said. "I think it's always going to be a challenge for women to be heard, whether it's in a conference room or in an issue-driven press conference."

Israel also observed a difference of coverage from when she worked on the Ann Richards campaign in the early 1990s. Richards ran for governor of Texas in the 1990

midterm elections, and Israel started out as a volunteer and rose through the ranks, working for Richard's at the Texas State Capitol after Richard's was elected. Pointing out the rumor mill, she said that the media accused Richards of using hard drugs, using her openness about her addiction to alcohol against her.

“There was a point in the campaign when her opponent, Mr. (Clayton) Williams, made a joke about (Richard's alcoholism), and said, ‘man, I sure hope she hasn't gone back to drinking,’” Israel said. “Everybody else was like, you know, she should be given credit for overcoming an addiction and being honest about it.”

Israel's experience with Richards, despite the ugliness that could – and did – occur, still jumpstarted her interest in politics. Her focus, however, is not in the traditionally feminine issues. Her main policy issues lie in transportation across the state of Texas.

“I'm often the only woman in a meeting,” Israel said. “I think maybe it could be refreshing to some media people that they're not talking to just another guy about transportation.”

In the last legislative session, however, Israel was not able to focus as much as she would like on transportation, and spent time fighting against the Texas “Bathroom Bill,” a bill that would make it illegal to go into a bathroom that did not match the person's biological sex.

“I get a lot of media attention because I'm also a member of the LGBT community,” Israel said of the session. “I have to speak up on behalf of transgender children, so if that's the case, so be it.”

Israel also talked about the expectations that are put on women in the political field, which are the same expectations that many women face, no matter what field they're in.

"I think we have high expectations of women," Israel said. "That we're going to be nice. That we're going to be cordial and professional."

These expectations are felt on all levels of government, but the higher up in office a woman goes, the more expectations and stereotypes she has to deal with.

### **Does the media really stand between women and the oval office?**

Research and examples show that there is a difference on how male and female candidates are covered in the media. This article shows the way media covers female candidates at different levels of government, and the difference is there. Through looking at four different women, this article also gives a more complete picture on how the media covers women running for political office. Whether it is intentional or not is a question for a different article. While acknowledging the issue is important, future research should study the intent of the media to further understand the issue.

*To view this project online with links to studies and research, visit  
[thesis.leelaschooler.com](http://thesis.leelaschooler.com)*

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