

“Flawed Vessels”: Media Framing of Feminism in the 2008 Presidential Election

Abstract

The 2008 election was a watershed year in presidential politics, with two prominent women, Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, drawing national media attention to gendered themes during the election. This study investigates whether/how the media connected these historic female candidacies to feminism by evaluating the national news media’s framing of feminism during the election. Using qualitative media discourse analysis, we analyze how discussions of these two prominent female candidates, as well as Barack Obama, were linked to framing of feminism in the news media. During the 2008 presidential election, the media recast evaluations of Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Sarah Palin into a discussion of the status of modern feminism. The news media framed the movement as fractured, highlighting existing conflicts within the feminist movement, while legitimizing post-feminism and choice feminism through the perspective of the Obama and Palin nominations. The news media also trivialized the movement by emphasizing style over substance in their assessments of whether candidates were (or were not) feminists. The results suggest feminist movement actors and goals may not substantially benefit from greater media attention prompted by increasing numbers of female candidates.

Keywords: Feminism, female political candidates, media and feminism, social movements, feminism and politics

Introduction

In the year leading up to the 2008 presidential election, the editorial pages were alight with discussions of candidates and gender, as two women, then-Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and then-Governor Sarah Palin (R-AK), came closer to the White House than any before. Having prominent women on the Democratic primary and general election ballots heightened the saliency of gender during the election (Ifill 2009). As attention to gendered identities and issues increased, it is likely this may have also led many in the media to speculate about the implications for feminism. Previous research suggests that feminism and the feminist movement are often not covered very favorably by the mainstream media, if at all (Ashley and Olson 1998). This is significant because social movements must compete for scarce news space to communicate their message, which is how most citizens become informed about the movement (Gitlin 2003). Therefore it important to analyze how the status of the feminist movement surfaced as an interesting subplot of election year drama, and the media's interpretation of that status.

At the same time, there is an increasing number of female candidates running for federal office. Media coverage of these women also tends to rely on stereotypes. Previous work suggests this stereotypical coverage stems from female candidates having to negotiate the double bind of being a female running in the masculine arena of politics (Kahn 1996, Falk, 2007; Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991; Heldman et al., 2005; Aday and Devitt, 2001; Heith, 2003; Jamieson, 1995). However, rarely do studies connect these two disparate literatures, even with the potential for the candidates' images to impact the discourse on feminism. Therefore, rather than examine news media coverage of feminism and female political candidates separately, as has been done in most prior research, instead, we analyze how gendered coverage of three

candidates, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Sarah Palin, were transformed into a benchmark for feminism. Connecting these disparate bodies of literature for the purpose of understanding the impact of these candidates on framing of the feminist movement,, our research question is: how did the news media interpret the present status of feminism through the lens of these candidates?

Overall, elite news media coverage oversimplified feminism by linking it to the nontraditional candidates in the race (Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Sarah Palin), which resulted in feminism presented as ideologically and generationally fractured. Pitting Obama and post-feminism as symbolic rivals to Clinton and second wave feminism in the primary, and then incorporating Palin and choice feminism into that narrative in the general election, the news media framed feminism as a variety of warring rivals, each with legitimate claims. Rather than present feminism as an independent movement, each of the candidates was presented as signifying a type of feminism, battling against the others with the lines drawn along the same familiar generational and ideological divisions. Second wave feminism was presented as outdated, while newer feminisms were the more inclusive, modern alternatives. This research has important implications for the feminist movement, particularly if the news media continues to employ these frames as more female candidates run for the nation's highest offices. While coverage of feminism has declined, the number of female candidates has increased (Center for American Women and Politics 2013). This construction of feminism and the intercession of the news media to simplistically frame the movement could also undermine movement unity by exacerbating conflict, while taking the message out of the hands of activists. Movement actors may want to reconsider their media strategies to respond to this changing political environment.

Media Framing: Feminism and Female Candidates

Although social movements attempt to communicate their message to the public, most of what the public learns about them is mediated through national news organizations (Gitlin 2003). This produces a dialogical, symbiotic relationship between media and social movement; social movements require media attention for mobilization and legitimization, while the news media feeds on the drama, conflict, and action generated by movements (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Barker-Plummer, 2010). However, the news media retains an advantage as the interpreter of events. The media's construction of reality through the creation of meanings is a "critical element in political maneuver" that allows the legitimation of action and the construction of political events through framing (Edelman, 1985; Schudson, 2003). Frames are an organizational tool that allow the comprehension of problems at hand and are used to choose, accentuate, and connect elements in a story that are consistent with a proposed broader perspective, or reinforce or undermine certain ideas or symbols (Gamson and Lasch, 1983; Hardin and Whiteside, 2010).

Journalistic and editorial norms may distort movement messages. Even with the news media's commitment to principles of objectivity and balance, consumer-based incentives toward simplification, conflict and dramatization often result in slanted news (Entman, 2010). The media favors dramatic conflict between opponents, so events such as protests typically gain more attention than issues, and more extreme voices earn disproportionate coverage (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993, Bradley, 2003). The goal of objectivity also encourages balance, which is habitually implemented by discussing both sides of a debate, often legitimizing both as equal even if they are not (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987). Finally, the media prefers simple stories that can be easily explained. Framing assists journalists in focusing the narrative, which can lead

to a less nuanced and complex portrayal of the movement (Gitlin, 2003, Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993).

For the feminist movement, news media frames are particularly important in shaping the ability of the organization to achieve its goals and maintain control over its message. Media coverage of the movement has declined over time (Barakso and Schaffner 2006, Mendes 2012, Cancian and Ross 1981), and framing has negatively influenced public perceptions of the feminist movement (Ashley and Olson, 1998; Terkildsen and Schnell, 1997; Rhode, 1997; Barker-Plummer, 2000; Barakso and Schaffner, 2006). During the second wave feminist movement, the news media framed anti-feminists more positively than feminists (Ashley and Olson, 1998; Costain, Braunstein, and Berggren, 1997; Rhode, 1997; Tuchman, 1978; but see Mendes 2011c, d). In particular, the media framed feminists as deviant, particularly for violating traditional gender roles and being different from ordinary women. This tends to separate out claims of feminists from those of 'real' women, framing feminists as disconnected and out of touch (Barker-Plummer, 2000; van Zoonen, 1992; Lind and Salo 2002). The movement was also overly personalized and trivialized, focusing on individual personal characteristics like appearance to diminish feminists (Lind and Salo, 2002; Bronstein, 2005). Feminism is typically framed by the media as narrowly focused on controversial issues (like abortion, or the ERA), while overlooking more popular goals. As a result, a significant proportion of the public often misperceives the movement as out of touch with their concerns, even when the movement shares their goals (Barakso and Schaffner, 2006; Huddy, 1997).

One source of this is a news media bias for authoritative voices, which undermines decentralized, grassroots movements like feminism (van Zoonen 1992). Journalists typically focus on a few "leaders" of the movement, which leads to the movement being represented

almost solely by formal organizational leaders who tend to be negatively constructed as inauthentic representatives of women's interests (Huddy, 1997; Schreiber, 2008). Sourcing established organizations also means that feminist movement goals are typically framed in liberal feminist, as opposed to radical feminist terms (van Zoonen, 1992; Mendes 2011c).

Studies suggest that recent news media framing of feminism is less likely to be negative today. Coverage of feminist activism has declined in favor of more lifestyle/popular culture features, and feminism in politics (Mendes, 2011d). Today's movement is also often portrayed as complex, but with second wave feminism framed negatively in comparison to post-feminism or other third wave feminisms (Bronstein, 2005; Mendes, 2012, 2011d). On the other hand, third wave feminists are portrayed as 'feminism lite,' a more girlish, frivolous version of feminism, typically presented as depoliticized, individualistic, and concerned more with appearance and lifestyle choices (Mendes 2012, 2011d; Bronstein, 2005). Similarly, studies note the growing relevance of neoliberal and post-feminism frames in movement media coverage (Bronstein, 2005, Vavrus, 2002, Mendes, 2011b). Neoliberal framing focuses on women's choices and how individualized decisions can empower women, but doesn't consider how the menu of alternatives might be influenced and limit one's choices (Mendes 2012). Few articles cite solutions to problems raised by the movement, and when they do, they are typically individualistic, rather than structural (Mendes 2011a).

An attempt to reconcile neoliberal assumptions with feminism is a version of third wave feminism, choice feminism, which typically refers to valuing women's individual choices without necessarily presuming traditional feminist goals. Under this framework, women can choose any issue stance or lifestyle, including traditionally conservative positions like being pro-

life or anti-equal pay (Ferguson 2010). We define post-feminism in the conventional sense, as the claim that second wave feminism has been made irrelevant by its success (Snowden 2009). Politically, this suggests a diminishing role for feminists, at least in U.S. politics, assuming they have already achieved access to traditionally male-dominated fields.

Mendes (2011a) argues that this coverage of second and third wave feminisms suggests the news media recognizes the movement's complexity, which is a positive sign for understanding diversity within the movement. On the other hand, there are far more areas of similarity than difference between these two types of feminism (Lotz, 2003). The media pitting feminists against each other to heighten dramatic conflict potentially undermines the areas of agreement in the eyes of the public and within the movement itself.

Feminism may also be linked to female political candidates, who may face the same difficulties with news media framing.¹ Historically, feminists strategically promoted the electability of female candidates to journalists with the goal of increasing the number of women in office (Kahn and Goldenberg 1991). One potential problem with this discourse is that gains in numbers of women in office are then assumed to be achievements of feminist goals, because the news media label female candidates as feminists (Vavrus 1998). The news media employed overly essentialist frames for female Senate candidates in 1992, assuming they were feminists mainly because of the political climate, and constructing them as outsiders even though many had significant political experience. In the "Year of the Woman" the media simply assumed the claims of female candidates matched feminist goals (Vavrus, 1998). With 2008 being a

¹ The substantial literature on media framing of female candidates mirrors that of the feminist movement. In comparison to men, the media tends to diminish female candidates' viability, focus on the novelty of their gender, cover them less overall, and focus on appearance or family connections at the expense of issue stances, political experience and qualifications (Falk, 2007; Kahn, 1996; Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991; Heldman et al., 2005; Aday and Devitt, 2001; Heith, 2003; Jamieson, 1995). Female candidates are in a 'double bind' – they have to run in a masculinized political structure, but maintain their femininity to remain a viable, legitimate candidate so as not to violate traditional gender norms (Jamieson 1995).

significant year for women candidates at the presidential level, we examine the extent to which the news media linked feminism to these candidates, and how they framed the status of the movement.

Qualitative Media Content Analysis

The evolving status of the feminist movement can be examined through news media texts. Qualitative news media content analysis is an important avenue to explore claims about constructed feminism. As Smith (1990:61) suggests, “knowledge of contemporary society is to a large extent, mediated to us by texts.” Thus we gathered news media articles on Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin and the national election from November 2007 through December 2008 to illuminate how these two particular female candidates were constructed along with the notions of feminism. After our initial round, for comparison purposes during the same time frame, we included Barack Obama, another non-traditional (i.e. non-white male) candidate. Using the search terms “Hillary Clinton,” “Sarah Palin,” or “Barack Obama,” and “feminism” and/or “feminist” we located 97 total articles from two newspaper sources (*New York Times*[46] and *Washington Post*[24]) and three newsmagazine sources (*Newsweek*[11], *U.S. News and World Report*[7], and *Time*[9])². The unit of analysis in this project was each news article. We chose these sources as representative of elite news, which can, in turn, influence the discourse of other elites (Paletz 2002). Of these articles, 36 percent were editorials with the *New York Times* contributing the highest percentage of editorials (72 percent) of the five sources.³ Rather than use a predetermined set of categories or a content analysis based on only select keywords, we opted for a more inductive methodology to critically analyze the latent content in the stories. This is

² Barack Obama was underrepresented in the article distribution. Forty percent of the articles exclusively focused on Hillary Clinton, 40% focused on Sarah Palin, and 13% focused on Barack Obama. The remaining articles (7%) focused on two candidates and feminism.

³ Letters to the Editor were excluded from analysis.

mainly because we found that news media frames connecting the candidates and feminist themes were more subtle than could be easily captured in similarly nuanced quantifiable categories. Instead, we found that within some broadly identified frames there was a conversation about what these candidates signify for women and for feminism, which we outline below.

Once the data were collected, it was coded by the authors who developed a series of categories for the frames describing the link between the candidates and concepts related to women or feminism (based on the idea that conceptually, feminism would be linked to the representation of women's interests by the media). Through our initial round of coding, we found two broad frames in the data: 1) conflict over the definition and meaning of feminism, particularly across types and 2) a discussion or set of assumptions about why each candidate does (or does not) represent feminism. Using these frames as a starting point, the authors each then recoded the stories, going back into stories related to each broad frame to identify further subthemes. This cyclical approach of repeated comparative analysis allowed the authors, working independently, to draw subthemes from the same data. Further analysis yielded two overlapping sub themes: 1) the simplification of the feminist movement by attaching candidates to types of feminism, consequently presenting the movement as fractured, with some types of feminism framed more positively than others, and 2) trivializing feminism by constructing it and the candidates in terms of lifestyle rather than issues. To best illustrate these subthemes, we include news article quotes as well as percentages for the prominence of these themes throughout the findings section to allow the reader to see the basis for our conclusions. For the second frame, the coders identified the part of the story where the candidate was either implicitly or explicitly identified as a feminist (or not). All of the potential reasons were listed, and then grouped into categories. For this analysis, we were interested in whether these were substantive

reasons or personal lifestyle choices, so we coded the collected articles as *issue-based* (candidate was discussed as feminist {or not} based on the issues they supported) or *lifestyle* (candidate was discussed as a feminist {or not} based on their particular personal circumstances and choices). Not all of the articles fit into these two original categories. Two additional categories emerged: *support of women voters* (candidates were feminist because they had {or did not have} the support of women voters, but no substantive reasons why those women supported them), or they were framed as *symbolic feminists* because of the discrimination or negative stereotypes they had to overcome during their career, their novelty as a female candidate, or because of their choice of campaign tactics (which might also be used to justify the candidate not being sufficiently feminist). We did not have any a priori hypotheses about these latter two categories, so we do not discuss them extensively in the analysis.

Results

What does the discussion by the mainstream news media reveal about the perceived status of feminism in 2008? First, we find that elite news media coverage oversimplified feminism by symbolically linking various types of feminism to individual candidates, creating rivalries spurred by the competitive electoral environment. As a result, the news media's primary frame constructed feminism as fractured, creating a competition among types of feminism. The attachment of feminism to specific candidates left readers with a sense of the movement as dominated by equally legitimate rivals in a campaign to define the heart of the feminist movement. There was also a winner in this campaign; the news media presented post-feminism and choice feminism as the more modern, legitimate alternatives to a more negatively constructed second wave feminism, particularly by highlighting the generational and ideological divisions. Second, we argue the national news media coverage also trivialized feminism by

explaining this construction in terms of lifestyle rather than issues. By prioritizing style over substance, the news media constructed feminism as a movement based on personal choice, not substantive goals, thus reaffirming the neoliberal framing of the movement.

For each candidate, we first discuss how each of the nontraditional (i.e. non-white-male) candidates in 2008 signified one type of feminism. Second, we ask: If each candidate symbolizes a type of feminism, how did the news media justify its claims that these candidates were (or were not) feminists? If the candidates were understood to be feminists (or not) because of a discussion of their issue positions, we might conclude that the public was being informed about how one candidate might be evaluated from a feminist perspective. However, recent research suggests that feminism is instead more likely to be discussed in the mass media in terms of de-politicized, lifestyle stories (Mendes, 2012; Bronstein, 2005). This echoes a theme from earlier research that feminists were often trivialized in the mass media (Lind and Salo 2002). As discussed earlier, we also coded the collected articles as *issue-based* (candidate was discussed as feminist {or not} based on the issues they supported) or *lifestyle* (candidate was discussed as a feminist {or not} based on their particular personal circumstances and choices).

Overall, we found that most articles (68 percent) gave some indication about why the candidate was/not a feminist. The largest subset of articles was lifestyle decisions (19 percent), while the smallest category was issues (7 percent).⁴ Therefore, 93 percent of the articles that gave some reason for linking these candidates and feminism did not discuss issues but instead focused on the personal aspects to construct these candidates as feminists or not. Next, we

⁴ The other two categories were support of women voters (16 percent) and symbols (15 percent), neither of which had significant substantive, issue-based content. Having the support of women voters be the litmus test for being a feminist relies on essentialized notions of women by assuming that just supporting a woman, regardless of her issue stances, is sufficient for being a feminist.

discuss these two aspects (the type of feminism with which they are associated, and the reasons they were portrayed as this type of feminist) for each of these candidates.

Hillary Clinton: Second Wave Symbol

The discourse about the candidacy of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton assumed she symbolized second wave feminism, typically noting her status as “a feminist icon” (*NYT* 11.15.08). Often, the media presented Clinton as an iconic representation of feminism, calling her a “symbol” (*NYT* 08.30.08), “true pioneer” (*NYT* 02.24.08) and a “long-time feminist” (*NYT* 02.05.08). Forty five percent of articles about Clinton framed her as a second wave feminist. In particular, a theme that emerged early in the Democratic presidential primary race was that Clinton’s candidacy was a major step forward in achieving one of the high-profile goals of liberal feminists: to increase the number of women in politics, elect a female president, and a fulfillment of the second wave feminist project (Kahn and Goldenberg 1991). Especially towards the conclusion of the campaign, the news media discussed the importance of her candidacy to the progress of women.⁵ Many stories appeared about women who were proud of the legacy of the Clinton campaign for women and the feminist cause. For example, a *Washington Post* article quoted a woman who brought her daughter and son, both wearing “Mommy and Me for Hillary” shirts to one of her final events, as saying they could both be president, but “she can go first” (06.08.08).

The assumption that Hillary Clinton symbolized second wave feminism was furthered by an often quoted *New York Times* editorial written by second-wave icon Gloria Steinem. She argued that to diversify politics, women voters should support Clinton because of her sex.

⁵ Clinton herself did not emphasize her feminist credentials until her June concession speech, noting “Although we weren’t able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it’s got about 18 million cracks in it” (Milbank 2008).

What worries me is that some women, perhaps especially younger ones, hope to deny or escape the sexual caste system... It's time to take equal pride in breaking all the barriers. We have to be able to say: I'm supporting her because she'll be a great president and because she's a woman. (NYT 01.08.08)

Steinem's liberal feminist argument calls for increasing the number of women in patriarchal institutions like the presidency so they can change the culture from within.⁶ The assumption is that, at its heart, feminism is about women, and therefore supporting Clinton is the ultimate feminist choice. The argument clearly links voting for Clinton and feminist goals. It also highlights generational divisions among feminists, noting that it is older women who came of age during the height of the second wave movement who supported Clinton, not younger women who she claims, deny sexism still exists.

As we noted previously, justification for these candidates being feminists focused on their lifestyle choices and not on the congruency of their issue stances with the feminist movement. Clinton was typically framed as a feminist because she overcame sexism on the campaign trail, and because of the novelty of her presidential campaign. While a number of stories constructed Clinton positively as a feminist, there were also a significant number that did not. In 25 percent of stories about Clinton there was concern about her feminist credentials, but nearly all focused on her personal lifestyle choices. Some criticized Clinton's background as too intimately tied to her husband (a "political wife") to be a true symbol of feminism (see Sheckels 2009). As one *Washington Post* article noted, "From a feminist perspective, Clinton's was not a perfect candidacy." This was mainly attributed to her riding her coattails of her

⁶ As is typical for media coverage of the feminist movement, the assumption of liberal feminist standards and the disregard for more grassroots, radical feminist goals was not interrogated (Mendes 2011c). Further underrepresented were articles on black feminists. Only three articles from our sample focused on feminism and black women voters. However, these few articles tended to treat the choice between identities as a zero-sum game, where one had to choose being black (voting for Obama) or being a woman (voting for Clinton), ignoring the lived realities of intersectionality in the lives of these women (see Major and Coleman 2008 for more on race and gender in Democratic primary coverage).

husband, but also her tolerance of his behavior: “the fact that her road to the White House involved standing by her man, no matter how badly he behaved, made her a flawed vessel for the feminist cause” (05.21.08).

In this case, Clinton’s status as a feminist icon was portrayed as diminished because she became a presidential candidate through a highly feminine path: the wife of a president who then ran for office herself. This quote also echoes other criticisms of the gendered nature of her strategic decisions because some claimed it disappointed as a truly feminist campaign, and rather became a typically masculinized presidential campaign just modified to elect a woman. Her campaign was critiqued for being too “calculating,” (*NYT* 01.05.08) particularly because of strategic decisions designed to assure voters she was “masculine” enough to be commander-in-chief. This is likely because female candidates must negotiate the “double bind” (Jamieson 1995), proving to voters they are strong enough to take on the masculine powers and responsibilities of the presidency while not violating gender stereotypes.⁷

Barack Obama: Post-Feminist

During the Democratic primary campaign, the favored rival to Clinton’s second wave feminism was post-feminism, with Barack Obama framed as the post-feminist alternative. While a relatively small number of articles (9 percent) discussed post-feminism and Obama as the dominant theme, within those stories the media particularly focused on female millennials supporting Obama because they were either disenchanted with second wave feminists or believed women had already surpassed the goals of the second wave. One *New York Times* article noted “Lots of [women] felt they did not have to vote for ‘the woman candidate’; it was

⁷ One example of this is the “3am” ad, which Carlin and Winfrey (2009) note was an attempt by the Clinton campaign “to combine the mother image with the more masculine commander-in-chief.” (335)

the ultimate feminist decision to find Mr. Obama the better candidate,” noting young women found identity politics “tiresome and anachronistic” (03.16.2008). One *Newsweek* story asked “Instead of lamenting the fact that the twenty something daughters of boomer women are for Obama, how about applauding the fact that these women... are doing just that?” (03.31.08).

These quotes exemplified the assumption that Obama was associated with the choice of younger feminists who rejected the claims of second wave feminists as irrelevant. This generational rift was apparent in a number of stories. For example, the following quote dismisses second wave feminism as outdated and unappealing:

Some women in their 30s, 40s, and early-50s who favor Barack Obama have a phrase to describe what they don't like about Hillary Clinton: Shoulder-pad Feminism. They feel that women have moved past that men-are-pigs, woe-is-me, sisters-must-stick-together, pants-suits-are powerful era that Hillary's campaign has lately revived with a vengeance. (NYT 03.05.2008)

Second wave feminism was more often framed as dowdy and anti-male, echoing previous work which notes that the media often frames this wave as less sexy and appealing than new feminisms (Bronstein 2005; Mendes 2012). This quote also exemplifies how Hillary Clinton was perceived as synonymous with second wave feminism, her pantsuits a symbol of the entire second wave of feminist activism. Barack Obama was portrayed as being preferred by younger female voters who were “yearning for something new” (*NYT* 02.01.08) who “felt no gender guilt for voting for him” (*NYT* 03.05.08).

Third wave feminism is often defined by its concern for multiplicity of voices and an adaptation of feminism to a more globalized world, which can include less focus on the category of ‘woman’ (Dicker and Piermeier, 2003). In the quotes above, it is “the ultimate feminist decision” *not* to choose the female candidate. The news media positively framed these younger feminists as rejecting “tiresome and anachronistic” second wave feminism.

As is clear from these examples, unlike Clinton, most stories failed to question Obama's assumptions about feminist credentials. In a few stories, Obama was portrayed as a feminist because of his wife, and being raised by a single mother (*NYT* 08.26.08). Typically when he was linked to feminism it was nearly always in a positive way. In the end, feminism during the Democratic primary appeared to exemplify a generational and ideological rivalry, with the younger cohort choosing the fresh face rather than the "woe-is-me, sisters-must-stick-together" second wave/female candidate, as observed by the *New York Times* stating that "Mrs. Clinton has generally bypassed younger voters. And they have bypassed her, flocking instead to her rival, Senator Barack Obama" (04.22.08).

Sarah Palin: Choice Feminist

As in the Democratic primary, the selection of Sarah Palin as the vice-presidential nominee in the general election prompted the news media to pick up their narrative again about the status of feminism but with a new alternative: choice feminism. At this point, the previous distinctions about feminism were lost as news media discourse celebrated a new brand of feminism that was favorably contrasted with both second wave and post-feminism. With Palin's addition to the Republican ticket, the media framed her as symbolizing choice feminism, which was presented as a legitimate feminist alternative grounded in neoliberalism and the primacy of individual choice. It was presented as open to those who were in opposition to traditional feminist issue stances such as reproductive rights or the ERA, distinguishing it from the previously discussed post-feminism of younger, ideologically liberal feminists. This brand of feminism was portrayed favorably because it was seen as more inclusive of conservative women, and therefore more representative than traditional feminism. Stories chronicled women

crowding in to see Palin who “expressed frustration that feminism and women's issues have seemingly been owned by Democrats” (*WP* 09.10.08). One story quoted a former Clinton supporter extolling Palin as someone who “rocks all the stereotypes of feminism” (*WP* 10.24.08). Palin was presented as a symbol of the expansion of the meaning of feminism, “by calling herself a feminist—once considered a dirty word by the religious right—Palin proclaimed that feminism is no longer synonymous with liberalism but something that could be shared and celebrated by all women” (*WP* 10.24.08).

In contrast to Clinton, who was cast favorably as a second wave feminist in 45 percent of the articles about her, Sarah Palin was positively portrayed as a symbol of choice feminism in 73 percent of the news articles about her. This clearly suggests that elite news media sources discussed Palin as a feminist symbol, and accepted choice feminism as a legitimate alternative to second wave or post feminisms. It was typically portrayed as a new brand of feminism, a redefinition of what a feminist could be, “a different kind of feminist” (*NYT* 09.05.08), or at least a symbolic recognition of the concerns of conservative women who were excluded by a feminism that claimed to be inclusive. In fact, much of the news media speculation early in the national race was that Palin would even attract moderate and liberal women to the McCain-Palin ticket (Robinson 2008). Throughout the campaign stories told of packed crowds with conservative mothers and daughters carrying signs like “Read My Lipstick” (*WP* 09.10.08). They were portrayed as the women who “spend their days trying to keep crayon off the walls” and Palin’s five children “only makes her that much more part of the sisterhood” (*NYT* 03.05.08).

Although not hailing her as a feminist icon like Clinton, these stories tended to characterize conservative women as having a renewed interest in politics because they now had

their own model of women's progress in politics, "a sleeping giant [conservative women] that has been awakened" (WP 09.10.08), their own living example for their daughters to emulate. In this way, the Palin nomination was portrayed positively because it brought more women into feminism; implying second-wave feminism had excluded them. Some stories even explicitly drew the connection to Clinton's failed presidential bid, suggesting that feminism was as much about (if not more about) viable female contenders than it was about ideology.

It was noted in Denver this week that Hillary left 18 million cracks in the highest hardest glass ceiling in America, [Palin] told the crowd. But it turns out the women of America aren't finished yet, and we can shatter that glass ceiling once and for all. (WP 08.30.08)

Regardless of political affiliation or issue stance, the assumption was that female candidates were feminists, and female voters supporting them were also feminists. Mirroring earlier findings, the "lipstick" theme also can be read as a rejection of perceived notions of femininity and beauty held by second wave liberal feminists. Choice feminism embraces all women's choices as feminist, accepting conservative ideology and embracing feminine sexuality. This narrative seems to suggest that if feminism is about representing the diversity of women's voices, and offering a model to engage women in politics, then Palin was contributing to feminist goals. In this way, news media attention legitimized Palin and choice feminism.

How did the media explain their characterization of Palin as a feminist? Palin's feminist claims were bolstered by her ability to balance a demanding position as governor with a large family, including a future grandchild, as well as by her proclaimed toughness. One women's rights activist was quoted as claiming that Palin was "demonstrating a view that some people would call feminism: I can be governor, I can have five children, I can shoot and field-dress a moose" (WP 10.28.2008). None of these reasons include her stances on issues but rather focused

on her lifestyle or symbolic reasons for being a feminist. For the news media, it was what these candidates symbolized rather than their stances on issues that made the feminists.

Although for both Palin and Clinton the dominant theme in a greater proportion of stories constructed them positively as feminists, there were also a significant number that did not. In 16 percent of news stories about Palin, there was significant concern about her feminist credentials, but again nearly all focused on the candidate's personal lifestyle choices. Most stories critiqued Palin's feminist credentials by focusing on her appearance, her "nose wiggle" and her "huggability" (WP 10.01.08) rather than her stances on issues.

In the end, Palin seems to represent less "an explosion of a brand-new style of muscular American feminism" (in the words of the contrarian feminist Camille Paglia) than the stereotypical former-beauty-queen-made-good who seeks affirmation about her abilities while people just titter about her clothes. (WP 11.02.08)

As evident in this quote, for many feminists Palin's candidacy did not advance the cause, while some did see her as a fresh face of "muscular American feminism." Whether highlighting her pithy quotes about lipstick or the perceived role of image in contributing to her success, the news media focused on these types of lifestyle choices, rather than discussing whether her issue stances were aligned with feminist ideals.

When the news media did examine issues, most related to Palin's pro-life position. Some stories were negative, assuming that feminists could not be pro-life, but others were more optimistic that Palin was designated as the woman to usher in pro-life choice feminism as a legitimate option. Several stories quoted the president of Feminists for Life, saying Palin's nomination is "one more step in a long march for women's history" (WP 08.30.08), portraying her as a symbol of a new brand of feminism that is "pro-life and pro-feminism" (NYT 09.05.08). Historically, the news media's overemphasis on abortion, to the exclusion of other important

feminist movement goals, has contributed to public misperceptions of the movement as narrowly focused, and its poor public evaluations (Barakso and Schaffner 2006).

Conclusion

That [fracturing of the feminist movement during the 2008 primary] has left today's feminist movement struggling to define its mission or wondering whether it even has one. Is the goal to promote and elect women everywhere, or is it to support the candidate viewed as best for the job, whether male or female? Wouldn't the latter be the more progressive course? (WP 11.02.08)

This study of news media coverage of feminism through the lens of the 2008 election sheds light on how the media's linkage of feminism to political candidates shapes the way that contemporary feminism is portrayed. With the emergence of prominent female candidates in 2008, the news media symbolically linked candidates to the feminist movement. This study investigated the news media's interpretation of the feminist movement through the prism of these candidacies. We conclude the national news media portrayed the movement as both fractured and trivial. Overall, elite news media coverage oversimplified feminism by linking it to the nontraditional candidates in the race (Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Sarah Palin), which resulted in feminism presented as a rivalry, both ideologically and generationally fractured. Pitting Clinton and second wave feminism symbolically against Obama and post-feminism in the primary, and then Palin and choice feminism in the general election, the news media framed feminism as a variety of warring rivals, each with legitimate claims. Second wave feminism was presented as outdated, while newer feminisms were the more inclusive, modern alternatives. Additionally, the media coverage of feminism in 2008 trivialized the movement when it did not take the opportunity to discuss how these candidates' issue positions might align with feminist goals. In the few instances where substantive issues were discussed, they were mainly limited to

abortion; a frame that likely contributes to negative public evaluations of the movement (Barakso and Schaffner 2006). The lack of discussion of feminist goals and issue stances trivialized feminism by evaluating the relative feminist credentials of these candidates in terms of lifestyle choices rather than issues. By prioritizing style over substance, the news media constructed feminism as a movement not disagreeing about goals and issues, but about personal choice, reaffirming the neoliberal construction of the movement. Combined with a lack of substantive information about feminism, these results suggest the feminist movement and its goals did not benefit from the attention the news media gave to gender during the 2008 election.

One interpretation of the news media's attention to the three types of feminism is to applaud its recognition of the diversity within the movement. However, this analysis suggests that there may also be a troublesome aspect, which is to present the movement as more concerned with conflict among feminists, rather than on shared goals. Since newer feminisms are often framed more positively, they also undergo less scrutiny and therefore may be disproportionately represented within the movement. Also, by prioritizing lifestyle over substance, the media constructed feminism as a movement not disagreeing about goals and issues but about personal choice, reaffirming the neoliberal construction of the movement. This may in part be due to the lack of activist voices in most of these stories, so feminists are not speaking for themselves.

In practical terms, the results from this analysis suggest that as more women run for public office, it is important for feminists to be aware that the media has difficulty separating female candidates from the feminist movement. Being automatically labeled a feminist can be either helpful or harmful to female candidates, depending on the voters to which one is trying to appeal. For example, conservative female candidates framed as feminists may be seen as able to

draw in moderate Independent women in the general election (as did Palin early in the campaign), but would have greater difficulty in a primary, where voters are more conservative, and anti-feminist (Koch 2002). On the other hand, male candidates appear to have more flexibility in whether to link themselves to feminism, and may reap benefits if it enhances their campaign strategy, perhaps especially against a female opponent, as did Obama in 2008. To counteract these media frames, feminist movement actors will need to find innovative ways to set a substantive standard to guide emerging political candidates and what that means for political office.

Although an increase in female candidates may seem to be an opportunity for feminists to raise awareness of movement goals and issues, the movement may (perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively) need to distinguish itself from some female candidates, even though the goal of the movement since the early 1980s was to increase the number of women in office. News media coverage is a dialectical process, where movement actors and journalists respond to each other (Barker-Plummer 2010), and our results suggest that the current coverage of the feminist movement lacks substance. If another major female candidate becomes a viable contender for the presidency, it will be vital for the feminist movement to have a strategy for holding both the media and the candidate accountable. To better understand how the movement can respond, future research on the movement's current media strategy vis a vis female candidates, along with studies of best practices other similar movements, are required.

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