

Media Bias?: A Comparative Analysis of Possible Gender and Ideological Bias in America's Most Widely-Circulated Newspapers



Stephanie Abbott and Dr. Lawrence Anderson
University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, Department of Political Science



Introduction

Media coverage is of central importance in determining how public figures are perceived by the public. This coverage, however, often betrays a bias in presentation of that public figure. This bias can come in one of two ways: first, in editorial content—the decisions and policies of the person being covered can be critiqued on the editorial pages and in variations of event, personality, and policy analysis. There is a second and more insidious version of bias found in the very words that are used to describe the person in question or the themes referred to while covering the candidate. In media coverage of events—elections, speeches, public appearances—adjectives and phrases used to describe those involved often carry a meaning deeper than the dictionary definition of a word. For public figures on the national political stage, the words, phrases, and content area chosen in covering them in media often come to define them in the minds of those relying upon the media for information.

This project seeks to explore the coverage given to political figures in an objective manner to determine the type and nature of any bias present in the coverage.

Methods

Papers Chosen for Analysis

- Circulation ranging from 960,864 to 2,528,437 (Audit Bureau of Circulation):

- New York Times*
- USA Today*
- Washington Post*
- Wall Street Journal*

Political Figures Chosen Per Criteria:

- Family:** At least one child and spouse
- Federal Executive Elected Office:** Cannot hold any federal level, elected office
- Gender:** Two males and two females must be analyzed
- Political Ideology:** Within each gender, one conservative and one liberal must be analyzed
- Presidential Contention:** Figures chosen must have either been unsuccessful candidates for a nomination in 2004 or 2008, or must be considered a possibility for the 2012 nomination

Key Words/Phrases

- Terms Connoting Gender:** *diva, emotional, vindictive*
- Terms Connoting Inferior Intellect:** *folksy, naïve*
- References to Physical Appearance:** *hair, clothing, shoes*

Figures Chosen

- Sarah Palin:** Former AK Governor, nominee for Vice President in 2008 (Republican)
- Hillary Clinton:** Former NY Senator, candidate for 2008 presidential nomination, current Secretary of State (Democrat)
- Mitt Romney:** Former MA Governor, (Republican)
- John Kerry:** VT Senator, nominee for President in 2004 (Democrat)

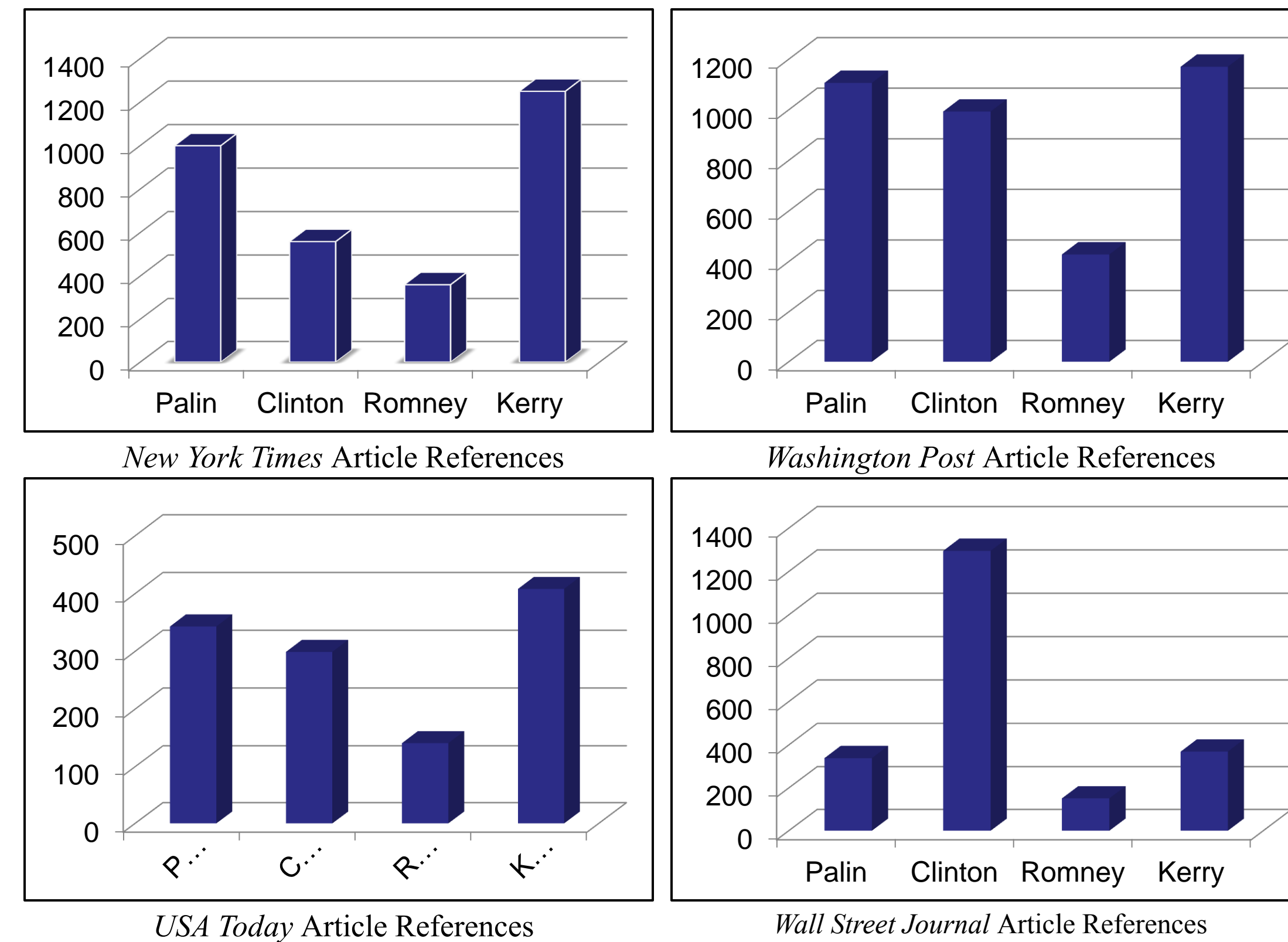


Works Consulted:

- Grammar and Gender*, Dennis Baron
- Feminist Media Studies*, Liesbet van Zoonen
- Women, Men, and Language*, Jennifer Coates
- Women Politicians and the Media*, Maria Braden
- Global Journalism Ethics*, Stephen Ward

Results

Number of articles in which figure is mentioned during analyzed time period:



Gender-specific words/topics:

- Only Palin and Clinton were subject to the word "diva," although use varied among the newspapers. The *New York Times* in particular used the word more than the other news sources, a total of 11 times (6 references to Palin, 5 references to Clinton)
- Only Palin and Clinton appeared in the *Style* section of the newspaper. Palin, in particular, appeared in the *New York Times* style section 5 separate times, while Clinton appeared 1 time.
- "Emotional" was much less limited by gender, although it appeared in reference to Clinton and Palin almost twice as frequently as their male counterparts.

Figure/Source	Div	Naïve	Hair	Folksy	Emotional
Palin NYT	6	5	10	2	6
Clinton NYT	3	9	4	2	5
Romney NYT	0	6	1	0	6
Kerry NYT	0	0	0	0	0
Palin WP	5	0	1	3	2
Clinton WP	0	1	2	0	2
Romney WP	0	1	0	0	0
Kerry WP	0	1	0	0	0
Palin USAT	3	0	3	3	4
Clinton USAT	1	3	3	1	1
Romney USAT	0	0	0	1	1
Kerry USAT	0	1	1	0	2
Palin WSJ	1	2	2	1	1
Clinton WSJ	0	1	1	1	1
Romney WSJ	0	0	1	0	0
Kerry WSJ	0	1	0	0	1

Editorial Content

- The editorials written by paid writers for the newspapers had very different levels of positive, negative, and neutral coverage.
- Negative/Positive coverage is determined by the general tone of the editorial content and also by specific rejections or acceptance of a figure and/or his/her ideology

	Pos. Op Ed	Neg. Op Ed	Neutral Op Ed
Palin NYT	7	16	6
Clinton NYT	10	12	4
Romney NYT	1	3	4
Kerry NYT	2	1	1
Palin WP	7	26	5
Clinton WP	16	5	12
Romney WP	3	4	3
Kerry WP	7	5	7
Palin USAT	4	6	3
Clinton USAT	6	2	1
Romney USAT	0	3	1
Kerry USAT	5	1	3
Palin WSJ	8	4	2
Clinton WSJ	8	11	3
Romney WSJ	1	10	8
Kerry WSJ	2	7	10

Notable Quotes:

"A woman seeking political office in 2010 faces a fashion quandary. The choice, in simplest terms, comes down to this: to follow the lead of Sarah Palin or cast a style vote with Hillary Rodham Clinton...At a glance, Ms. Palin — she of the designer jackets, rump-hugging skirts and knee-high boots — would seem to have been a game changer, loosening up a restrictive, if unwritten, campaign dress code with one that expresses a more conventionally feminine look. Her bright, curve-enhancing garments and loose, shoulder-grazing hair — even her rimless glasses — have been taken up by a handful of candidates on the climb." —*New York Times*, Ruth La Farla, October 20, 2010

"In her latest act of defiance, Hillary Rodham Clinton gets a new, longer hairdo." —*Washington Post*, September 2, 2010

"Friends worried that she [Palin] appeared anxious and underweight. Her hair had thinned to the point where she needed emergency help from her hairdresser and close friend, Jessica Steele." —*New York Times*, Jim Rutenberg and Serge Kovalski, July 12, 2009

Conclusion

For politicians, media coverage has the potential to change the views of readers. As so often noted in the study of journalistic ethics, one assumes journalism, particularly nationally-circulated newspapers, are as ethical and objective as possible. From this research, it is clear that different figures are subject to different treatment in the news media, but the degree to which it differs and the ways in which it differs vary among figures.

While it is easily concluded that female politicians are subject to great scrutiny in their fashion choices, the tone of editorial content varies between ideologies. Sarah Palin's editorial coverage was overwhelmingly negative in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, but was positive at twice the frequency of negative in the *Wall Street Journal*. Hillary Clinton, in the *New York Times*, was viewed negatively more often than positively, but only by a small margin of two articles, while the *Washington Post* printed more than three times the number of positive editorials as it did negative editorial content.

Perhaps most notably, *USA Today*, while publishing far fewer articles than the other newspapers presented the most neutral material for each of the figures analyzed. While there was some variation among editorial content and key word appearances, the statistics were relatively similar in both positive and negative coverage for the figures.

Both Palin and Clinton have cited unfair media treatment at various points in their careers and this research indicates that both have valid arguments they are treated differently than male political figures. Both also provide somewhat of a lightning rod with their personal lives and children, but Romney, a father of five, has little coverage of his family, while Palin and Clinton have a challenging time even protecting their marriages and children from a harsh media spotlight.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Undergraduate Research Program for making this project possible and Dr. Anderson for his role as research mentor. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Susan Johnson, department chair, for her assistance in making this opportunity a reality. I would also like to thank Dr. Stephen Ward of the University of Wisconsin-Madison for his contributions to the methodology of the project.