

GENDER BIAS AGAINST SARAH PALIN: A CONTENT ANALYSIS
OF NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS

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GENDER BIAS AGAINST SARAH PALIN: A CONTENT ANALYSIS
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Katherine Coffey Irwin

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VITA

Katherine Coffey Irwin, daughter of Don and Janis Coffey, was born July 22, 1968, in Dallas, Texas. She graduated from Texas A&M University, College Station in 1991 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism and a minor in Spanish. Thereafter, her journalism work included: newspaper police reporter, photographer, feature writer, marketing assistant, radio DJ and reporter, technical editor, graphic designer-illustrator, and web page developer. She married Stephen Irwin in 1993 and has three children, Elisabeth, Jack, and Gabriella. In 2007, after 10 years of being out of the work force, she returned to school to start the master's program in the Department of Communication and Journalism at Auburn University.

THESIS ABSTRACT
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OF NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS

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A content analysis was conducted to examine whether a gender bias existed in national newspaper coverage of the 2008 presidential election. This presidential race proved to be historical in many aspects. Not only was the first African-American man elected to the office, but two female contenders with a viable chance of being elected also ran for the offices of president and vice president. The focus of this study is on Alaska Governor Sarah Palin who was a newcomer to the national political scene and who was the second female in history to run for vice president. Past research reiterates the powerful effects news media have on political campaigns (Ansolabehere, Behr, & Iyengar, 1993). Palin was from a working class family, a career-driven mother, rose quickly from city government to governor, and then ran as a vice presidential candidate. Palin, although conservative, may be considered in modern times as a feminist running

for political office, thereby being in opposition to traditional male hegemonic roles established in our political discourse. Gender bias towards this masculine ideology may have hindered Palin's candidacy, portraying Palin's feminine traits and personal image instead of focusing primarily on policy issues.

Analysis between Palin and her male opponent Joseph Biden were made by examining news and editorial coverage from two prominent newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Coding for possible gender biases included these category comparisons: personal image versus performance, policy issues versus personal information, and "masculine" versus "feminine" political issues. Findings indicate that a gender bias existed against Palin as covered within U.S. newspapers. Conclusions confirm that women still struggle in the national political scene for equal coverage as their male counterpart, therefore hurting their campaign and reducing chances for female political roles.

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DEDICATION

This effort is dedicated to my family.

To my parents, Don and Janis Coffey, back in Texas, for giving me a simple, cultured, and great childhood; for instilling inquisitiveness; and for continual encouragement...and that being unique is a good thing; and to my sisters Kyle and Carol.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION	1
	a. In Retrospect - the 2008 Presidential Race	1
	b. Sarah Palin and News Media	2
	c. Premise of Study	4
II.	LITERATURE REVIEW	7
	a. Gender Bias	7
	i. Media Portrayals of Female Political Candidates	8
	ii. Gender Bias against Women	17
	iii. Male Hegemony: Myth and the Media	21
	iv. Feminine versus Masculine Political Issues	26
	b. Media Bias	30
	i. News Framing and Structural Bias	32
	ii. Political Discourse and Influences of the Media	36
III.	RESEARCH HYPOTHESES AND QUESTION	43
IV.	METHODOLOGY	45
	a. Newspaper Data	45
	b. Coding	47
V.	FINDINGS	50
	a. Gender Bias: Comparison between Sarah Palin and Joseph Biden	50
	i. Personal Image versus Performance	50
	ii. Policy Issues versus Personal Background	51
	iii. Feminine versus Masculine Political Issues	52
	b. Gender Bias: Analysis between NYT and WP	53
	i. Personal Image versus Performance	53
	ii. Policy Issues versus Personal Background	55
	iii. Feminine versus Masculine Political Issues	57
VI.	DISCUSSION	59

a.	Personal Image and Performance	59
b.	Personal Background and Policy Issues	60
c.	Feminine and Masculine Issues	60
VII.	LIMITATIONS	62
VIII.	CONCLUSIONS	65
IX.	DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	71
	SOURCES	73

I. INTRODUCTION

a. In Retrospect - the 2008 Presidential Race

The United States 2008 presidential race proved itself historical being that it was the first time an African-American man was elected to the highest office of this country. President Barack Obama's election was revolutionary in view of the fact that the American Civil Rights struggle took place just over 40 years ago. However, this election was also significant from beginning to end in terms of progress for women in politics. Hillary Clinton was the first female from a major party with a viable attempt to become the next U.S. president. During the Democratic presidential primaries, Clinton was closely tied with Obama during primary elections through May, according to Gallup polls released during the primary elections (Gallup Poll, 2008).

As for the vice presidential seat, Sarah Palin, a young newcomer to the national political scene, was the second female in U.S. history to be chosen as a presidential running mate with a feasible chance of winning. The first female contender in U.S. history to run on a major party ticket for vice president was Geraldine Ferraro in 1984, more than two decades ago. It is noteworthy to add that Palin was the first woman ever from the Republican Party to run for the office of the vice presidency. Obama, Clinton, and Palin made substantial progress toward improved diversity in election campaigns in the U.S. where traditional roles in politics mostly have included white men. Diversity and progress were made with great strides during this election, but there were also

accusations that the women campaigning struggled for political equality and were faced with gender bias that existed in news media; a hindrance to any woman's chance for election and a substantial role in national politics (Seelye, 2008; Scarborough, 2008). The focus of this study is on Governor Sarah Palin, who was new to the national political scene. Analyzing data from a content analysis of newspapers, the current study will examine in detail whether the newspapers were in fact biased in one way or another when presenting the female vice-presidential candidate, Sarah Palin.

b. Sarah Palin and News Media

The ontology of this gender bias may have damaged the vice-presidential campaign of Sarah Palin, who built a large demographic base of young conservative voters and who boosted esteem for the McCain-Palin ticket. The seemingly politically-off base comments about Palin in mass media included: "inexperienced," "just a hockey mom," "blue-collar," "Wardrobeat," "narrow-minded," "one of the folks," "good looking," "a babe." It could be assumed that voters' views of politics often come from news media's portrayals and interpretations (Kahn, 1994). News media also constantly raised concerns about whether, if elected, Palin would be capable of juggling the demands of the vice presidency with her complicated family life, such as her eldest daughter's pregnancy and raising her youngest child with Down syndrome. Although these topics may prove to be newsworthy, these types of questions about balancing family and political work are not typically raised with a male political candidate. In response to the media scrutiny of Palin, even Obama seemed frustrated by the campaign coverage. Obama deemed the news coverage inappropriate and said that Palin's daughter's pregnancy "has no

relevance to Governor Palin's performance as a governor or her potential performance as a vice president." Obama added, "My mother had me when she was 18. How a family deals with issues and teen-age children - that shouldn't be the topic of our politics" (Seelye, 2008, p.1).

One liberal columnist disagreed with the accusation that Palin received unfair and biased coverage against her. Reider (2008) suggested that Palin was not a victim of the media, but just did not participate in very many interviews or press conferences. Palin's media scrutiny, Reider said, is essential in the democratic process, and painted a clearer picture of the female candidate, than that of political reformer who wants to "clean up Washington" (Reider, 2008, p.1).

On the contrary, a conservative columnist suggested that Palin received a great deal of gender bias against her, not only from the media, but also from women: "She went from mom, to mayor, to governor - an astounding rise to power that should be applauded by feminists. But because she is a conservative, none of that matters. In fact, feminist are leading the attacks" (Scarborough, 2008, p.1). Scarborough suggested that *The New York Times* took Palin's stance of standing up to the "good ol' boys" in Alaska and distorted it into a front page story that said Palin pursued vendettas. Scarborough said that liberals of today are different than the economic liberals of the 1930s or civil rights advocates of the 1960s and instead want to redefine the nation's social values.

Although Palin was a politically conservative candidate, she may have represented a detachment to the Western male dominant ideals that exist in our society, and therefore could be considered a feminist in her own right. Palin is from a working class family, a

career-driven mother, and strong political candidate, the archetypal candidate normally advocated by liberals against traditional male hegemony. Palin may have represented a new female ideology in the Republican Party that challenged dominant male and upper class social ideologies. This study was designed to further our understanding of female gender bias as revealed in political discourse in national newspapers.

It is important to note that this thesis does not pertain to the political candidate most deserving to win the election. Rather, the crucial premise is whether Palin, as a new female political figure on the national scene, received gender-biased media scrutiny in comparison to her male counterpart and political opponent, Joseph Biden, thereby receiving inequitable coverage that might have influenced voter's perceptions. Gender bias in the news media is particularly important because the media have shown to play a vital role in the processes of self-governance; not as a provider of information but as a catalyst of public opinion about politics and other significant cultural subject matter (Habermas, 1989).

c. Premise of Study

Palin was a novelty to the national political scene; therefore consequently a larger quantity of news coverage about her background and family existed for Palin as it does for other new candidates. But this does not answer the question as to whether Palin received unequal *quality* coverage about the issues and if the media paid attention to her wardrobe and personal image so much as to have a gender predisposition against her. As a result of the United States being a historically male hegemonic and patriarchal society, where men are regarded as the authority (Bystrom, Robertson, & Banwart, 2001) gender

bias towards this masculine ideology and against female political candidates may still be prevalent today in national news coverage.

It is interesting to note that in human nature, one observes and reports something from his or her own social and political disposition and background, therefore a bias towards certain issues and candidates is already established. A media bias occurs when just one standpoint of an issue, problem, or person is presented in news reports and at least one or more perspectives are omitted. A media bias usually occurs when reporters, editors, and other news associates insert their own opinions about a certain issue, person, or party affiliation into the content of news reports (Eisinger et al., 2007).

This content analysis evaluates and compares newspaper coverage of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* concerning the 2008 vice-presidential candidates, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin and U.S. Senator Joseph Biden, to examine if any noticeable gender bias existed. Category comparisons between these two male and female candidates include performance versus personal image, political policy issues versus personal information, and feminine versus masculine political issues.

Did Palin really have an adequate chance as the other candidate, considering the media's coverage of her? Was there a gender bias toward the politically seasoned senator while simultaneously dismissing Palin? These questions raise concern as to whether, aside from the popularity of any candidate, all political candidates in national elections receive fair news coverage.

News media are the major source of information about political candidates; therefore any bias can affect the representation of a candidate in news media as well as

the way voters form their opinions about the candidates (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2005). If news media rely on particular gender stereotypes when covering male and female candidates, and if this significance in stereotyping creates discrepancies in news coverage, then the media's treatment of male and female candidates could have important repercussions for voters' knowledge and choice of the candidates (Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991).

This thesis first reviews the literature on media portrayals of female political candidates and gender bias that has existed within state and national political races. Other related topics, such as male hegemony, feminine versus masculine political issues, and influences of the media's political discourse, and the framing process of news are also examined. Thereafter, results from a content analysis of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* articles during the 2008 presidential election reveal the two vice presidential candidates' portrayals in news media.

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Gender Bias

The United States has made great strides towards equal rights between men and women with the women's suffrage movement and the feminist movement, including campaigns on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, sexual harassment, and violence. Despite the paradigm shift towards progress and away from the traditional male-dominated society, women still do not have the same equal opportunities as men in politics (Watson & Gordon, 2003). This inequality becomes apparent within the national news media political discourse as female political candidates are often subject to sexism. Sexism, or gender bias as described in this media study, is an attitude held by a person or group that one sex or gender is inferior to or less valuable than the other (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993). In order to fully understand the foundation of this problem, one must take into account different aspects of gender bias that may exist in the media, including feminine versus masculine political issues, the ideas of hegemony, patriarchy and androcentrism, and the political discourse and framing by news media.

By covering male and female candidates unequally, news media may hinder women's chances of success in the political arena resulting in a gender bias in favor of male candidates. The question remains whether women candidates receive the same treatment from the media on their paths to political office (Bystrom, Robertson, &

Banwart, 2001). This content analysis strives to answer this question as it relates to Palin's 2008 bid for the vice presidential seat.

In America, men have traditionally held the most powerful positions in national government. The idea of a female possessing national political power within the office of the presidency or vice presidency is in opposition to the dominant Western ideology, which implies that men are the dominant sex over women (Bem, 1993). For example, accepted stereotypical images of women are the mother, sex object, damsel in distress, and iron maiden, while stereotypical images of men are of the sturdy oak, fighter, hero, and breadwinner. These images convey men to be the decision-makers within the family and society (Wood, 2007). Palin could be considered a symbolic representation of empowering American women gender roles, breaking free of these traditional Western female and male roles. Palin works full time, has four children (her husband stays home with the children), serves as U.S. governor, likes to hunt and fish, comes from a working class family, and ran for the national political office of the vice presidency. If the media rely on certain gender stereotypes when reporting about male and female political candidates, then news media's treatment can have significant consequences for voter information and candidate preference. By covering male and female candidates differently, news media may hinder a female candidate's opportunity to achieve in the political world (Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991).

i. Media Portrayals of Female Political Candidates

Researchers have examined female candidate portrayals in public discourse, particularly in mass media. Studies were conducted at the state and national levels to

assess gender bias from past national news media. In particular, studies have shown that the beauty queen imagery is still largely employed by news media to describe female candidates and incumbents (Watson & Gordon, 2003). Personal image of female candidates also becomes the center of attention by news media rather than their stances on policy issues (Anderson & Sheeler, 2005). This was the situation with Governor Christine Todd Whitman preceding her second term as governor of New Jersey. During her reelection debate versus Jim McGreevey in 1997, Governor Whitman's performance was framed by the media in terms of her "regal appearance" rather than her stance on political issues. For example, "as for the Governor, she did well too...she looked crisp, in a tailored, broad-shouldered turquoise suit. She had an answer, a *plausible* answer, for every jab from her Democratic opponent" (Anderson & Sheeler, 2005, pp. 87-88). Although Whitman narrowly won the election, her media campaign coverage was more gender biased and not quite the same as her male counterpart, McGreevey.

Perhaps Whitman's media coverage, as well as many female politicians' media coverage could be compared to a beauty queen pageant. The beauty queen image of Texas Governor Ann Richards, utilized by the media, attempted to restrain her in a way that female politicians have encountered in the past (Anderson & Sheeler, 2005). The media were unusually concerned about Richards' attire and personal image, such as her silver hair. For example, rather than focusing on her first day on the job as governor, *The Houston Post* highlighted what Richards chose to wear. As preparations began for Richards' inauguration, personal image took precedence over her political proposals. Richards' hairstyle was a news item in itself and the media devoted many articles and

stories to talking about her hair. The governor's hairstyle was considered so interesting that news reports of a possible alteration were considered a cause for alarm. In fact, this stereotypical reporting of female candidates changing their hairstyle or outfit may imply to some voters that the female candidate wavers or is easily influenced when it comes to important issues. Some reports said that Richards altered her hairstyle on an impulse—again perhaps an indirect suggestion by the media that Richards might waiver on political issues.

According to Bystrom (2006), journalists often frame female politicians as responsible for the actions of their husband and children; however the same reporters seldom frame male politicians in the same manner. Reporters often ask female politicians questions that they hardly ask male politicians. Reporters often depict female candidates in a way that highlights traditional gender roles, focusing on personal image and personal life. For example, a news story in *The Washington Post* described the failed attempt for a U.S. Senate seat by Lynn Yeakel from Pennsylvania as a “feisty and feminine fifty-year-old with the unmistakable Dorothy Hamill wedge of gray hair... a congressman daughter with a wardrobe befitting a first lady... a former full-time mother (Bystrom, 2006, p. 171).”

Duerst-Lahti (2006) also found a media bias against female candidates, stating that the media were inclined to focus on personal image, apparel, and personal life of female candidates, otherwise known as the hair, husband, and hemline problem. The focus on families and personal lives is apt to weaken the qualifications and accomplishments of

female political candidates, since they are often reported on in the media in conjunction with their personal relationships.

Geraldine Ferraro, who in 1984 was the first female U.S. vice presidential candidate from a major party, also drew large crowds because of her popularity. But, Ferraro, as Palin, was portrayed with feminine traits, such as “feisty” and “pushy but not threatening” (Baird, 2008). Ferraro said that although Palin’s as well as recent presidential candidate Hillary Clinton’s candidacies were exciting and popular; it did not render a difference on Election Day for these female candidates, nor affect who became president (Baird, 2008). Men are not the only ones who believe in the male dominant and stereotypical roles within politics. Women in the past have had a tendency to discount or become wary of powerful female politicians, especially when their life may include that of being a mother. Ferraro said that many American women in 1984 thought she was a threat to the traditional mother role, which is to stay home and raise children (Watson & Gordon, 2003). Women seemed skeptical of Ferraro since she was campaigning instead of taking care of her children. But Ferraro reiterated the fact that during the time of the vice presidential campaign, her children were in their late teens and basically already grown, no longer needing a mother at home full time. The 2008 presidential elections that included Palin showed progress from the last time a female ran for vice president. Ferraro stated that times have changed and women’s portrayals in the media have improved in 25 years since her vice presidential campaign. But Ferraro added that women still suffer in the political scene and are not considered bona fide equal candidates to men (Watson & Gordon, 2003).

In 2000, another female who received a large amount of news coverage that was unquestionably gendered was Elizabeth Dole. Heldman, Carroll, and Olson (2005) suggested that Dole's news coverage stalled her political candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination because of gender bias. During the presidential primaries, Dole was the number two candidate in the Republican primary polls, but the news coverage of her at that time did not give her justice as a viable candidate as her male counterparts, instead the press reported more on Dole's personality traits and personal image. In addition, journalists regularly framed Dole as a novelty within the race for the Republican presidential nomination rather than a strong contender with a good chance of winning.

Kahn and Goldenberg's (1991) content analysis of state newspaper coverage found that female candidates for the U.S. Senate races of 1982 through 1986 were treated differently by the media, which in turn, might have influenced the success of the female candidates. Female candidates received less news coverage, and the coverage tended to focus more on political capability of the women and less on policy issues. Furthermore, female candidates' capability or viability was often more pessimistic than that of male candidates. News coverage often depicted female candidates as not forceful in communicating with the military, implying that female candidates do not have the capabilities to be a senator.

Kahn's (1994) content analysis of newspaper coverage in 47 statewide elections demonstrated that differences were noticeable on a number of aspects both in the U.S. Senate and gubernatorial races. Female candidates received less coverage than male candidates and the news coverage tended to focus on their improbable chances of

success. Female candidates also received a smaller amount of coverage when it comes to their policy platforms.

Devitt (2002) found in a content analysis of six daily U.S. newspapers that both female and male candidates received at that time almost an equal amount of news coverage. Nonetheless, news coverage of female candidates focused more on personal issues than on policy issues. The author argued that focusing on a female candidate's attire, for example, or marital status did not allow voters to know where the female candidate stood on policy issues or whether she was qualified to hold the office. This focus on female traits in news coverage may also be due to the overwhelming number of male reporters covering gubernatorial races. For example, during the Elizabeth Dole presidential campaign, male reporters were more likely than their female counterparts to cover personal issues of Dole than her positions on policy issues.

Imbalanced coverage of women and men candidates exists if journalists highlight personal aspects about women candidates, including personal image, attire, marital status and children (Devitt, 2002) and not when reporting about men. It is interesting to note that male politicians receive more coverage about their experience, accomplishments, and stances on political issues, such as war, than their female counterparts. The difference in gender coverage between men and women leaves the public without a full picture as to where a woman candidate stands on an issue, or even qualified for the job, resulting in consequential voting behavior that may be against the female candidate. This political discourse creates a lack of legitimacy necessary for a female candidate to operate equally in politics, where economics are far more important than clothes. This study showed how

female candidates were framed during the gubernatorial races in 1998. Researchers raised the question about possible barriers that a female candidate may face on the campaign trail, which in turn influences public opinion and maybe even voting behavior.

Media coverage of Hillary Clinton and Palin during their races for president and vice president, respectively, was found to take each female candidacy seriously. But reporters seemed to be suspicious of Clinton's feminist image (Gibbons, 2009). Clinton turned a negative dialogue about her pantsuits into a positive one at the Democratic National Convention Speech by referring to the "sisterhood of the traveling pants" catch phrase about her female supporters. But still, media coverage pertained to Clinton's personal image, unlike her male counterparts. Palin's media exposure was also inundated with personal matters and less about political issues. Both female candidates endured an overwhelming amount of sexist news coverage about their personal image that their male counterparts did not have to endure.

Ironically, from the overwhelming critical coverage of female candidates during the 2008 presidential election, the negative coverage was at times led by females. One female reporter from *The Baltimore Sun* criticized Clinton for a color of a "tangerine" pantsuit worn one evening during campaigning (Gibbons, 2009). One female *Washington Post* cultural writer discussed how Clinton's cleavage showed while giving a speech on the Senate floor. Clinton's campaign used the reporter's remarks as a fundraising topic to indicate how Clinton faced sexism that her male counterparts did not (Gibbons, 2009).

As for Palin, coverage of apparel, class, and overall personal image seemed even more significant than of Clinton in the media. Terminology used about Palin included

derogatory comments such as "Wardrobegate" and "Wasilla hillbillies;" two descriptions associated with Palin's campaign attire and shopping habits. Heflick and Goldenberg's (2009) research showed that Palin was objectified in the media during campaigning, which damaged her campaign viability and may have diminished voters' intentions to vote for the McCain-Palin ticket.

Sexist language does exist in the national political scene and in news media, as particularly evident throughout the 2008 presidential election with Clinton and Palin (Kim, 2008). Although sexist language such as "ball buster" and "hockey mom" were prevalent, the mere fact that the public is aware that sexism exists is evidence of social progress, as indicated by Ferraro, who said that while she was running for vice president, she was in the midst of "sexist crosshairs" from the other candidates and the media. Ferraro could not even talk about male hegemony that existed in the media 25 years ago, but said that progress has been made since her pioneering candidacy. In 1984 Ferraro made history as the Democratic vice presidential nominee, being the first woman on a presidential ticket. Ferraro's candidacy, according to Watson and Gordon (2003), revealed that the media and voters alike treated a female candidate differently from the male opponent. Ferraro's family and background as well as her relationship with her father became more of an issue than the national issues at hand. George Bush, the Republican Party's vice presidential nominee, was not asked such questions. After the 1984 campaign was over, Ferraro hoped that the next female candidate for the presidential ticket would find less attention paid to the style of the woman's campaign and more to substantial policy issues.

One mock political speech conducted by Aalberg and Jenssen (2007) tested for gender bias against women. The research audience was composed of both men and women. Audience members watched separate video tapes, first of a male mock politician giving a speech, and then of a speech given by the female mock politician. After both candidates' speeches were shown, the audience completed a questionnaire. Results showed that although both the male and female politician presented the verbatim speech, the male politician was assumed more knowledgeable, trustworthy, and convincing than the female politician. Variance in scores resulted from the male audience consistently rating the female lower and the male higher. Female audience volunteers gave both the female and male politicians almost identical scores on all traits (Aalberg and Jenssen, 2007).

In a recent study, Chiao, Bowman, and Gill (2008) also used a mock election and found that competence was rated as important for male and female candidates; but only did an attractive personal image matter for the female candidates. Results showed that the women candidates were viewed as less competent overall (Chiao, Bowman, & Gill, 2008). This mock election included both male and female voters who judged various male and female political candidates on competence, dominance, and attractiveness and whether a candidate was approachable, based on his or her facial appearance. All voters preferred candidates who appeared more competent. It was interesting to note that in this study, male candidates that seemed more *approachable* and female candidates who looked more *attractive* were the more successful candidates.

Voters can be misled about the qualifications of a woman candidate when the media's focus is more about her personal image than the issues she stands for. And if women are receiving less coverage about the issues, then how can a voter support them? This carries a negative impact on the rise of women involvement in politics. Research suggests that female candidates do not receive the same quality (not necessarily quantity) of news coverage that their male counterparts receive during campaigning in state and national races. According to Falk (2008), who conducted a content analysis comparing men and women in presidential campaigns, news media have a pattern of preference for men in public office. Although Hillary Clinton had polled better than Obama during the month that both candidates announced their candidacy, six top circulating U.S. newspapers ran 59 stories mentioning Obama in the headline and just 36 mentioned Clinton. Falk (2008) studied 132 years worth of news coverage of women running for national political office from 1872 with Victoria Woodhull, the presidential candidate for the Equal Rights Party, until 2008. The researcher found that not much had changed after 132 years. Falk claimed that men receive a larger number of stories, longer stories than female counterparts, and more issue-oriented coverage. Describing their attire and personal image, women received three times more coverage as men; candidate's age was more frequently mentioned with female candidates; and gender was almost always indicated within news reports, but almost never for men.

ii. Gender Bias against Women

When news media focus on a woman's personal image, namely objectification of a female candidate, for example, the public's perception of competence can be decreased.

Heflick and Goldenberg (2009) discussed how women candidates are objectified in the media, which construes women as less human or less male, thereby reinforcing male hegemony. These researchers theorize that focusing on a woman's personal image can reduce perceptions of competence; personal perceptions as well as social perceptions. This in turn construes a woman as an "object" and less human. It was interesting to note that Heflick and Goldenberg (2009) chose both Sarah Palin and Angelina Jolie as the two media targets of objectification in the research. These researchers argue that the focus on Palin's personal image may have reduced intentions to vote for the McCain–Palin ticket. Research shows that women in general are targeted more for sexually objectifying treatment than men (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Nussbaum, 2000; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009).

The term "objectification theory" was coined by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) and links together the objectification of women in politics and in the media when the main focus is on physique and appearance. Objectification simply implies that the media, popular culture, and individuals can lead a woman to internalize an observer's perspective of her own body. When a female internalizes an observer's perspective of her own bodies, this woman may live much of her life in the third-person, or namely self-objectification.

"Although sexual objectification is but one form of gender oppression, it is one that factors into-and perhaps enables-a host of other oppressions women face, ranging from employment, discrimination, and sexual violence to the trivialization of women's work and accomplishments" (Fredrickson & Roberts, p. 174).

Many women don't seem to mind this type of attention, but in the long run it lowers their standards as a strong political candidate against men who do not have to be physically objectified for political media attention. During the 2008 presidential election Palin's legs were photographed frequently as if Palin's legs represented her. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) add that the visual media can portray women as though their bodies were capable of representing themselves instead of their intelligence or what they can offer as a human being. For these reasons, objectification diminishes a woman's well-being and limits her potential.

One controversial photograph taken on October 8 by Reuters (2008) includes a blurred close-up of Palin's legs. Many critics believed this resemblance of Palin was sexist because Palin was being represented as a sex object as she delivered a speech to a campaign rally. The photo was taken of Palin's calves from behind with the face of a young white man in the audience seen between her legs as he looks upward at the candidate. Palin, probably unaware of the photo at the time, was giving a speech to a large crowd in Pennsylvania. Perhaps Palin used the coverage of her personal image as a tool for power. Physical attractiveness can translate into power for female candidates, but this attractiveness must appeal to the tastes of the dominant male culture (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997).

Fredrickson & Roberts added that visual print media's portrayals of women include an emphasis on the body, whereas men are usually portrayed in print media with an emphasis on their head and face, and with greater facial detail. This research was more than 10 years ago and visual print imagery has evolved to today, when both men and

women politicians have close-up photos of their head and face, thereby maybe being an improvement from the past towards equality.

Political philosopher Nussbaum (2000) theorized on human capabilities, an approach at looking at women by focusing on what a person can do instead of his or her attractiveness. People can be informed about another individual, aside from his or her gender, by the intuitive idea that life is worthy of the dignity of that human being.

“Women have all too often been treated as the supporters of the ends of others, rather than as ends in their own right, thus this principle (capabilities theory) has particular force with regard for women’s lives” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 6). This research pertains to gender bias, in the realm of politics as well as human rights, based upon the premise of judging of a person by his or her personal capabilities, not by gender or socio-economic background. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) suggest that personal image monitoring increases shame and anxiety and diminishes awareness of internal bodily states, resulting in negative implications of objectifying the female body.

Building on feminist study, Heflick and Goldenberg (2009) also argue that a woman is objectified if she is construed by the media as if her body is capable of representing them. Research on objectification provides insight into the psychological consequences that objectified women face, but still needs to address how the focus on women’s appearance and image affects the overall perceptions of women’s abilities (Heflick and Goldenberg, 2009).

iii. Male Hegemony: Myth and the Media

In order to gain a clear understanding of why female political candidates are often subject to gender bias within the media, one must understand an essential building block of gender bias: male hegemony. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1977), in his media cultivation theory, elaborated on Western male-domination ideology by saying that consensual understandings are instilled by society and disseminated by mass media. These beliefs that men are superior and possess power over women are assumed true by both men and women. According to Hall (1977) common sense in a society is agreed upon wisdoms, such as Western male hegemony, that do not require much reasoning because the wisdom has traditionally been assumed as common sense. As a result, this consensus is what allows society to classify things into simple, meaningful terms. This results in the dominant ideology reflecting, or serving, the interests of the dominant class of society.

Gramsci originally coined the term hegemony in the 1930s with his theory of cultural hegemony, which explains why working classes in Europe did not revolt against the dominant rulers (Forgacs, 1988). This philosopher defined hegemony as an ideology, a diverse culture that is ruled by one class through common ideas. This occurs, Gramsci said, when a ruling class has total social authority and can coerce others in that society to conform to dominant ideals. The ideas of the ruling class become the norm, as universal ideologies, and are perceived to benefit everyone, while only benefiting the capitalist class (Forgacs, 1988; Gramsci, 1968).

Not only does Gramsci's hegemony theory pertain to gender bias, but androcentrism does as well. Androcentricism reiterates why female gender bias exists in the media and politics today. Bem (1993) states that androcentrism is the belief that men are inherently the dominant or superior sex, namely male-centeredness, which has prevailed in the history of Western civilization. This is the central concept of androcentrism, which benefits the male experience and views it as the norm. Female experiences are considered as sex-specific deviations from the norm. Men are believed to be "the human," while women are viewed as the "other." In defining the other, men define everything in terms of similarity or dissimilarity from themselves. Men believe others' experiences to be inferior to their own or as deviant from the norm, defining things in terms of the significance for men personally.

Androcentrism that is embedded in our political discourse has led to the reproduction of masculine power within cultural discourses, social institutions, and thus, individual minds (Bem, 1993). Bem argues these theories as the lenses of gender not only shape our perceptions of social reality, but hinder women's chances in the work force, for example, such as unequal pay. This social male ideology has deprived women of equality, including in the political realm. Furthermore, this masculine power reproduces itself when men and women deviate into different and unequal life situations or political status. Women are sex objects, viewed only in terms of sexuality, as mothers by taking care of the emotional needs of everyone, as children by being cute but not taken seriously, and as iron maidens, who are independent, ambitious, and tough. Iron maidens are instructed to act more "feminine" and thus non-threatening. In politics the

stereotypical images of sturdy oaks are frequently repeated (Bem, 1993). Traditional gendered stereotypes suggest that men represent the ideal or norm and women are judged in opposition to this norm. Any communicated norm is channeled through mass media. The media become the principal means for the production and distribution of culture and its influence expands into all other channels of public communication (Hall, 1977). Hall suggests that although the media disseminate information to audiences, they merely reflect the dominant ideologies that the audience chooses to accept as real. Journalists may believe they are achieving effective communication, Hall (1977) argues:

“They (mass media) are reflecting unconscious limits and unconscious connections with dominant ideology, and aiming to win the consent of the audience as subordinates, by affecting their decoding ceaselessly (to) perform the critical ideological work of ‘classifying out the world’ within the discourses of the dominant ideologies” (p. 346).

In a study about foreign dignitaries and the role of diplomat wives, Wood (2007) accounts the acceptable political gender roles in the early to mid twentieth century, including that a successful wife of a diplomat had commanding beauty and gentle charm, confidence and competence, and was strong, but not threatening. Women of that time period almost never ran for political office, nor tried to become a foreign diplomat. Instead, the powerful women were the wives of the actual politicians and diplomats who helped their husbands with social and diplomatic functions and decision making. Female gender was an effective tool used by U.S. state department officials, who acknowledged that wives of the American Foreign Service were ideal domestic role models. The wives

of American diplomats had attractive social and domestic qualities that defined and improved American representation abroad. With her charm, the American Foreign Service wife reflected—or was encouraged to reflect—the qualities deemed important for American diplomatic representation (Wood, 2007). The fact that many U.S. women from the twentieth century started their role in politics as a supportive wife rather than the actual politician reinforces the belief that male hegemony has been prevalent throughout U.S. political history.

Another familiar terminology for male hegemony is patriarchy, a social system where men are considered the authority within the family and society and where power and possessions are passed on from father to son. This male hegemonic myth has prevailed in the history of Western civilization and has led to a majority of masculine power within cultural discourses, social institutions, the media and individual minds (Bem, 1993; Hall, 1977; Forgacs, 1988).

Hall (1977) reemphasized that hegemony depends upon the consent of the subordinate classes, who are susceptible to the media's systematic tendency to reproduce ideals by the dominate class. But Western male hegemony is established and reinforced not only through the media's cultural leadership, but also through "agencies of the superstructures" including the family, the education system, the church, the media, cultural institutions, the law, police and the armed forces (Hall, 1977, p. 213).

The fact that America's society still believes in these gender stereotypes reinforces the existing myth that men are the dominant sex in politics and women are weaker one. These cultural lexicons about male hegemony communicated in mass media can be

considered as social myths. Myths can be described a belief system, a social reality that is created by and reflects the values of its people. Boorstin (1961) said that Americans are trapped in the mass mediated pseudo-event, where events, such as political campaigns, are created as a cultural process. Mythologies communicated in mass media reveal valuable insights into the way that audiences condition themselves to accept these myths, such as male hegemony, in order to interact with the social world (Reid, 2007).

Myths play a similar role in American political culture as they did in ancient Egypt. During ancient times, heroes in the mythical accounts taught people about correct behaviors, morals, and ethics to reinforce existing societal beliefs of the dominant class. Societal beliefs were based upon the public opinion and accompanying dominant ideologies of those ancient cultures. The idea of dominant control has been around for more than two thousand years and not just in ancient Egypt. Greek philosopher Plato reflected upon Western philosophy and politics in his famous book *The Republic* (~380 B.C.) and hypothesized on the compatibility of individual choice and political domination (Peters, 1995). Plato contrasted the terms *doxa* (opinion) and *epistêmê* (knowledge). Contrary to the scholars at that time, Plato explained how *doxa* was a popular belief, subject to change, and not all that was “available to human cognition (*epistêmê*) was sure knowledge of the unchanging ideas underlying the visible world” (Peters, 1995, p. 4). Since the beginning of civilization society members have partaken in political domination because they have been conditioned for their choices of needs and wants, both misguided as freedom. This in turn creates social myths that people believe as true (Peters, 1995). In the media’s political discourse these male hegemonic myths have also prevailed, leaving

female candidates to endure gender bias because women have not traditionally fit into these stereotypical political roles.

The U.S. presidency has developed and evolved as a position of extreme influence and command not only of the U.S., but also of the world. Therefore, whoever is elected to the role must fit the current dominant ideology of strength. According to Reid (2007, p. 84):

“The myth of the presidency is inspired by the idea that there is a presence of awe, power and authority which surrounds the figure of the president; that he or she is, unlike the rest of us, somehow slightly more than human. This myth functions widely within news industry (dealing with real presidents) and within the popular culture entertainment industry.”

iv. Feminine versus Masculine Political Issues

Voters' beliefs that men and women candidates should have more knowledge and skill about certain political issues can be shaped by the media in a way that encourages sexism and works against female politicians. Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) defined masculine political issues as the military, the economy, and crime, which are roles considered more essential for senior politicians to have proficiency in than having a proficiency in stereotypical fields of feminine political issues, including poverty, healthcare, children's issues, or education. *Masculine* responsibilities defined through Western male hegemony have been viewed by society and media as more essential to the presidential office than *feminine* responsibilities, which are considered more empathetic and less strong. The most masculine position held in the U.S. is that of the commander-

in-chief of the armed forces, a position held by the president. Throughout history, only men have held this executive position therefore voters are only familiar with media political discourse of male presidents. A female in this position would be unfamiliar to voters and be against the dominant Western ideology that implies only a man can hold this position.

Cappella and Jamieson (1996) suggest that the mere use of strategy and framing of political issues by the media and politicians can be considered masculine thought. Researchers add that as a result of this framing by the media voters may have the tendency to mistrust politicians. This framing includes a preoccupation with the game and strategy of politics rather than the social problems and solutions that are at hand (Cappella and Jamieson, 1996). Strategy coverage is a focus on who wins or loses; such as the language of war, games and competition; a focus on performers, critics and the audience; an emphasis on performance styles and perceptions of candidates; and an emphasis on polls numbers.

In contrast to the descriptions of masculine political issues and thought, characteristics of feminine issues include those of family and child care and are regarded as more appropriate for subordinate and non-executive levels of political office, principally the judiciary level (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). But it is important to note that a man who, in addition to being associated with masculine issues, also possesses characteristically feminine political strengths does not have a liability for achieving higher office (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Acceptable characteristics of politicians are a central element of gender stereotypes and a significant determinant of expectations about

male and female candidates' spheres of policy and issue proficiency. Voters in general are reluctant to elect a female presidential or vice presidential candidate because the candidate is portrayed and viewed as less able and experienced to supervise the military, manage war, and oversee the economy. But the same voters seem to be unchanged by female candidates' supposed proficiency of the arts, education, and healthcare.

Other stereotypes for female candidates include being compassionate and warm, and one who communicates strength and decisiveness (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Since the Western stereotype of a leader is that of a man, women candidates are successful if voters are convinced that a woman candidate possesses masculine traits and is competent on male policy issues. On the contrary, if female candidates act too assertively, as Clinton was labeled in the 2008 presidential primaries, they may be criticized, unlike their male counterparts, for being too aggressive.

Gender bias research shows a link between policy competence and female traits; therefore how a candidate is labeled has implications on trait attributions (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993), such as feminine and masculine traits, and how they are perceived by voters. Female politicians must act assertively to be noticed, according to gender research. But if they are perceived as threatening and act too assertively, then they are more likely than their male counterparts to be criticized, and voters may dismiss them as a viable candidate. This phenomenon can be described as a "double bind," a trap that condemns women no matter what they do (Jamieson, 1995).

Watson and Gordon (2003) found that female politicians were evaluated positively to handle such issues as education and healthcare, which can be considered more

feminine topics. However, female politicians were regarded as less able to manage crime, foreign policy, and domestic governmental problems, which can be considered more masculine issues. In elections, where the aforementioned issues are the primary interests, female candidates often find it difficult during media coverage to exhibit their proficiency on these central campaign issues. Perhaps this is a result of the overall gender differences in the treatment of male and female candidates in the media, as reiterated in this thesis study.

A basic differentiation between feminine and masculine political issues now has been made. In order to better understand the meaning of “feminine” and “masculine” descriptions and distinctions of analogous words need to be established. Political scientist Sykes (2008) details some differences. Masculinism attributes associated with men include strength, determination, and decisiveness, such as the institute of the presidency. Likewise, feminalism is traits associated with women. Feminalism assumes female action and includes women’s own preferences in its construction. Feminalism differs from feminine, a concept constructed by men and assumes women as weak and inferior to men. “Feminism” is comprised of an ideological element of feminalism that seeks to enhance women’s power and achieve equality between women and men (Sykes, 2008).

The degree to which the role of the president requires masculinism varies throughout different stages of political development, including “historical time” and “political time,” argues Sykes (2008). Developments in “historical time” magnify the most masculinist aspect of the presidency, the role of commander in chief.

It can be concluded that gender bias towards Western male ideology where men are considered as more capable to hold executive political office and where portrayals of women include that of the weaker sex, result in a long history of media bias against women.

b. Media Bias

Media bias depends on many factors such as a reporter's party affiliation, a reporter's interest in a specific political issue, or even the gender of the reporter. News bias can also be prompted by editors, publishers, influence of political leaders, and influences of advertisers. But what constitutes bias? Bias is defined as a preference or partiality that may inhibit or prevent objective or fair judgment about an issue, situation, or person (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993). More specifically a media bias towards a candidate in political news reporting can be distinguished as coverage that systematically favors one candidate by attending to that person with more prominence (Schiffer, 2006; Robertson, & Banwart, 2001; Dennis, 1997; Fico, & Freedman, 2008).

Journalist McCollam (2009) said that as a result of Barack Obama's esteem during the 2008 presidential election, news media did seem more biased toward Obama and his vice presidential running mate, Biden. But McCollam said typically what is perceived as media bias can depend upon the media critic's party affiliation. For example, if the news is reporting conservative issues, such as tax cuts, and in a positive manner, than a liberal may consider the news bias toward conservatives. And if the news leans toward typically

liberal issues such as the environment and recycling, then conservatives may construe the news as having a liberal bias.

Political biases toward a certain candidate, party, or issue are established by audience members even before he or she reads the day's news. Most Americans are interested in political affairs that affect his or her personal life and pay attention to mass media's news coverage of those policies. A media critic also should remember that members of the media are also audience members of the news and have their own predisposed political opinions. Perception of news coverage is based upon a person's own bias, which is in line with the early theory of Sears' and Freedman's (1967) selective exposure, defined as "any systematic bias in audience composition." This theory is based upon the idea that audience members are rational thinkers, but prefer to expose themselves to arguments supporting their views. Today, with the increase in mass media outlets, audience members have even more choices to expose themselves to their preferred medium and content of choice. The expansion of the new media (Internet sites and portals, blogs, and constant video and audio feed from non-journalism-trained persons) plays an influential role in how voters may think about an issue and how media bias may be played out. With the proliferation of news media outlets, voters can find just about anything that reflect personal views.

The selective exposure theory could be challenged by an earlier theory, Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, which states that humans are essentially irrational or *rationalizing* beings, but not rational, therefore associations with cognition and reality clashes with a person's desire to maintain consistency with already established

cognitions, including that of Western male hegemony ideology. Festinger claimed that people trade in objective reality in order to maintain personal psychological comfort. Do some members of the media partake in cognitive dissonance? Beniger and Gusek (1995) concluded that after more than fifty years of debate and heuristic study, people can be both rational and irrational thinkers depending upon social situations. Therefore Beniger's and Gusek's argument that people are irrational and rational thinkers can be applied to any assumed bias from the media, including gender bias against women.

i. News Framing and Structural Bias

In studying the media's portrayals of candidates, research has focused on how men and women are framed by news media as political contenders. Consequently a new understanding can be made about how framing can transform into bias during the general elections (Scheffle, 1999).

Proliferation of newsworthy information occurs on a daily basis. Based upon space and time allotment, news organizations and reporters cannot possibly report everything they see and hear. Therefore a predisposed selection process takes place in the news gathering process, and as a result of this selection process, reporters often end up formulating a personal understanding of a news event. This procedure results in news reporters framing instead of reflecting the political world. With that said, it can only be natural that a reporter may place in personal biases when gathering news. The topic of media bias has concerned scholars in both mass communication and political science, who may conclude that reality may be slanted in favor of a candidate, namely "paradox of objectivity" (Schiffer, 2006).

News reporters must select certain aspects of reality and emphasize them, but the concern is how stories are organized as to promote certain desired effects (Reese, 2007). How certain attributes become associated with particular issues is also a concern brought to attention in framing research. Progress has been made in empirical research that shows when separate news elements are looked together at as a whole, a larger picture may reveal possible media bias and show important information that may have been left out of the content. Framing analysis opens up room for interpretation, captures a dynamic process of negotiating meaning, and highlights the relationships within discourse. (Reese, 2007).

One study tested whether an observer's perception of political news media is related to his or her own ideological positions. Based upon national survey, Lee (2005) suggested that audiences' ideologies affect how they view the media and that the best predictor of a perceived media bias is political skepticism. It was interesting to note that this study explored the idea that the more extreme a person is in terms of ideology, the more likely they perceive news media biased.

More than 2,400 campaign stories analyzed by the Project for Excellence in Journalism revealed not a bias in favor of Obama and Biden, as much as the negative coverage of the McCain and Palin campaign in comparison (McCollam, 2009). And McCollam agreed that Tina Fey's depictions on *Saturday Night Live* of Palin helped shape the public's impression of Palin. It was interesting to note that stories written by women tended to give more attention to Democrats and seemed to be more critical of female candidates (Fico, Freedman, & Love, 2006). Several factors play within how news

bias is created-not only reporter's personal bias, but structural biases within news organizations.

Fico, Freedman, and Love (2006) found that reporter gender, newsroom diversity, and newspaper size greatly affects news bias; in sum the news organization's structure is what creates imbalance. In this study, nine newspapers that covered U.S. Senate races in 2004 were even in quantity and space allotted to each candidate, but news reporters were also found to reinforce personal beliefs in news stories, such as giving more partiality toward a certain party affiliation or political issue. These researchers created a theoretical framework to explain why bias exists in the media. The political process is what first gets media attention, thereby shaping news coverage. A critic must also consider the media's resources, the structure of that news organization and how the audience is reached. It is important to note that as within any organization, goal attainment routines, such as rewards and punishments, reinforce desired behaviors, such as expected reporting styles (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Other influences on news content include non-media institutions (banks and doctors, for example), the characteristics of the media's organization, work routines with that organization, and the characteristics of individual journalists.

In elaboration to media bias, a distinction of structural bias can be made. A structural bias occurs when items in the news are selected by news media to be reported rather than other things because of the nature of the medium as well as the financial incentives that accompany commercial news programming instead of only an assumed bias by news reporters (Schiffer, 2006).

Other researchers agree to what may constitutes structural bias, which can be formed by journalistic news values, work routine, resources of the news organization, and the news organization's interaction with other institutions that influence the gathering, processing, and transmission of news (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Structural bias affects news coverage when the news organizations have limited resources and depend upon external sources. These external sources have more financial and political influence, therefore the information received by them may be biased even before the news is reported. According to a 2007 Pew Research Center study most Americans (55 percent) now believe news media are biased, which is a ten percent increase from two decades ago (Zeldes, et. al, 2008). Structural bias rather than partisan bias may be a better explanation for the observed imbalance shown in television news during the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections (Zeldes, et. al, 2008).

An older study found that reporters tend to report news in ways that they wish it could be, therefore news may be dominated by the hopes of news reporters. Cole and Hamilton (2008) reviewed Lippman and Merz well-known content analysis published in 1920 about *The New York Times* coverage of the Russian revolution. History shows that hope and fear were the main factors that shaped the coverage by the press (Cole and Hamilton, 2008).

A news media critic may question why reporters and editors choose to omit or insert labeling sometimes and not at other times in the news. These insertions and omissions have implications on how the news is processed by readers. Labels are

heuristic cues where readers remember a person by their descriptions rather than by actions or policy statements (Goldberg, 2001).

Hayes (2008) discusses issue ownership and how each major political party professes to own certain issues, such as tax cuts and the environment. Depending on how news media cover these issues may create partiality towards one candidate and party. Candidates are covered more positively when news focuses on issues that their party “owns” rather than with coverage of opposition issues (Hayes, 2008). In this study, news favoring Democrats included issues about social welfare and Republicans received favorable coverage from news about defense and taxes. Results showed that political candidates have an incentive to focus on issues owned by their party in order to receive positive coverage. News media perpetuate these associations of issues with certain parties, therefore issue ownerships becomes reiterated for each major political party and candidate (Hayes, 2008).

ii. Political Discourse and Influences of the Media

Obviously news media do not have such powerful influence as to brainwash its audiences. The focal point of concern here is rather about the media’s political discourse and influences on voters. For the past forty or more years theorists have concluded that news media do play an essential role in framing the news as they see fit, therefore influencing how news is construed. Cohen (1963) said that news media may not always be successful in telling people what to think, but news media are successful in telling its readers what to think about. In 1972 McCombs and Shaw elaborated on Cohen’s thought. “While the media may have little influence on the intensity of attitudes it is hypothesized

that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues” (p. 177). Habermas also had similar thoughts, stating that news media play a vital role in the process of self-governance, not as a provider of information but as a facilitator of public opinion (1989).

Does the media’s biased coverage of politics really influence voter opinion enough on Election Day? Or are the media merely reflecting what society already thinks about issues and candidates? Carey’s (1989) ritual view of communication pertains to mass media’s transmission of information to audiences and how opinions are created. “A ritual view conceives communication as a process through which a shared culture is created, modified, and transformed” (Carey, 1989, p. 43). Past communication research is grounded in this theory about persuasion, attitude change, and behavior modification, socialization through transmission of information, influence or conditioning; otherwise known as an individual’s choice over what to read or see (Carey, 1989).

Sears and Freedman (1967) argued that voters decide themselves their own *extent* of political engagement, namely the de facto selectivity theory. People decide which information to pay attention to therefore when it comes to politics people seek news that supports his or her views and avoid information that does not reinforce their views.

Noelle-Neumann (1973) disagrees with Sears and Freedman’s selectivity process and theorized that media effects come from more than just people selecting preferential information. This researcher said that the idea of mass media does not change attitudes or public opinion, but only reinforces them, cannot be upheld under the conditions of cumulation, ubiquity, and consonance (Noelle-Neumann, 1973). Cumulation is a long

term effect of communication processes between mass media and the public. Cumulation is not based upon one communication process or event, but upon the accumulation of (news) information gathered over a long period of time by audiences (Noelle-Neumann, 1973) thereby reinforcing Western male ideology. This theory can come into play with gender bias. After numerous decades of similar dissemination of news, voters interpret that information as the norm and therefore may not question any bias (Noelle-Neumann, 1973).

The second idea of Noelle-Neumann is ubiquity, the omnipresence of mass media in our lives, being that it exists everywhere and all the time. Ubiquity of news is even more prevalent today amidst the Internet and hundreds of news outlets available 24 hours a day. Noelle-Neumann's third argument of consonance includes stereotypes or agreements extensive throughout mass media (such as gender or partisan bias) therefore it is rare when a person can form an opinion independent of the mass media. Together, the ideas of cumulation, ubiquity, and consonance form Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory, reemphasizing that public opinion leans towards conformity to dominant members of society, thereby reinforcing (male) hegemony.

If public opinion leans towards conformity, then the media's political discourse may instigate that conformity, therefore setting the agenda for political campaigns and influencing voter opinion. McCombs and Shaw's agenda setting theory is almost 40 years old. Does agenda setting still hold true today amidst the proliferation of news media outlets, such as the Internet? McCombs and Shaw articulate the influence that news

media have on voter's attitudes, therefore affecting a candidate's overall campaign success, making or breaking it.

As it was mentioned earlier in this literature review, an abundance of news occurs all the time and reporters have to discriminate, based upon their allotted space (print or Web) and time (broadcast, audio and video), to what bits of information are chosen for that specific news report. Reporters cannot report everything they see and hear. As a result of reporters deciding on what content to use, a predisposed discrimination results during the news gathering process. And as an outcome of this selection process, reporters end up formulating their own understanding of a news event or report.

Researchers reiterate the importance of raising questions about media dissemination of news and public opinion (Funkhouser, 1973). How issues are covered and how it relates to public opinion create our realities and perceptions of the world. Public opinion may be nothing more than the public's regurgitation (and conformity of opinion) back to polls what is current in the news, not necessarily what an individual thinks about an issue (Funkhouser, 1973).

Boyle, Schmierbach, & McLeod (2007) claim that news media deliver "a cue" to the public about a political group's stance on an issue as well "a cue" to a candidate's stance toward certain groups. In their study, participants were shown a news story about a fictional extremist group, chosen to be similar to the participant's views. After reading the story, participants indicated their intent to vote for a candidate based on the candidate's support or opposition to the extreme group reported on in the story. Findings showed that the liberal participants were more likely to vote similar to a liberal

politician's stance about an ideologically extreme group than the conservative participants were to vote similar to a conservative politician's stance.

Do news media reflect the agenda of the candidate? Ridout and Mellan (2007) argue that it depends mainly upon the presidential race studied, the candidate, and the medium examined. But in their study of national newspapers, researchers found that reporters did not consistently reflect the issue content of candidates' speeches. *The New York Times* focused on candidates' traits rather than how they discussed the economy and domestic policy (Ridout & Mellan, 2007). "All too often, candidates will talk in paragraphs, presenting detailed plans for reforming the tax system or tackling the health care crisis and reporters will respond by printing articles about the candidate who fell into the orchestra pit" (Ridout & Mellan, 2007, p. 59).

Another point to consider is how news coverage has rapidly increased and evolved since 1995 when the Internet became widespread. Patterson, who studies news media and political discourse, said that a rise in interpretive reporting has resulted from the changing world of news media outlets. Interpretive reporting has increased the cynicism of readers about government; and the consequence is a focus on negative aspects of politics (Patterson, 1996).

This researcher argues that the theory of media bias fails because it ignores the checks and balances established within the news structure, where two standards are applied in a democratic system: accountability and representation. Although reporters tend to be liberal by nature, the norm of their profession includes an obligation to

balanced treatment of the political parties, which is a code reinforced by professional journalism editors who oversee reporters' work (Patterson, 1996).

As shown in this literature review, communication research reaffirms how many factors may influence the political discourse of the media in a way that produces subsequent bias. This includes an existing bias against females and toward masculine-male hegemonic ideologies as exposed in research about national political elections. Gender bias, also described as sexism, has taken place in the media and politics with a focus on the female candidate's personal image and less on important substantial policy issues. As Watson and Gordon (2003) studied, the beauty queen imagery is still used frequently in news media to describe female candidates. The media's attention to personal image reinforces the objectification of women, who are subsequently viewed as less capable and less *strong* than their male counterparts, and this may hurt women's chance to hold political office.

Past scholarly research points out that biases are disseminated through the media's framing of issues, structural bias, and even predisposed dispositions of journalists. Carey (1989) thought that the mass media is the forum where shared ideologies (including Western male hegemony) are created and modified, as well as transformed.

The literature review implies that gender bias exists in U.S. news media as a result of traditional Western male hegemony, which reinforces the myth that men are considered *stronger* and more qualified than women running for office, as revealed in news media coverage. Therefore it is logical to assume these theories may also be applied to Palin's experience during the 2008 presidential election media coverage. The focus of

news stories seemed to be about Palin's personal image and family problems (such as the dilemma of balancing being a mother and politician); a focus that Biden and the other male presidential candidates did not have to endure.

III. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES AND QUESTION

The objective of this content analysis is to examine if gender bias existed in national news media during the 2008 presidential campaigns, especially against female vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Research suggests that female candidates do not receive an equal quality (not necessarily quantity) amount of news coverage as their male counterparts receive from the media on the path to political office (Bystrom, Robertson, & Banwart, 2001). Thus, as mentioned in the literature review, a focus has been on personal image, personal background, and feminine political issues. The goal of this study is to correlate these issues with Palin's media's coverage that may have hindered her campaign and chance as a viable candidate. More specifically, I look at whether the media have presented Palin in a biased way by focusing on these "less-than-substantial" matters and issues (personal image, personal background, feminine political issues). I tested the following hypotheses relating to this type of gender bias in news coverage of Palin:

H1: National newspaper coverage of Palin, compared to Biden, will pay greater attention to her personal image than her performance (personal image versus performance).

H2: National newspaper coverage of Palin, compared to Biden, will focus more on her personal background than her policy issues (policy issues versus personal background).

H3: National newspaper coverage of Palin, compared to Biden, will pay greater attention to feminine political issues over masculine issues (feminine versus masculine political issues).

Because I examine only two newspapers, the generalizability of the findings will be highly limited. This will be particularly so if the two newspapers I examine are different from each other, with one being significantly less or more biased than the other. That is, if there is a significant inconsistency even in two newspapers, it will be impossible to argue my findings can be generalized to many newspapers in this country. On the other hand, any consistency between these two liberal newspapers will enhance – at least marginally – the external validity of my findings. In this regard, I put forth the following research question to examine if there is any considerable inconsistency between *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in their presentation of Sarah Palin and Joseph Biden.

RQ: Is gender bias found consistently against Palin across different newspapers (NYT and WP)?

It is important to note that researchers have determined that *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* as appropriate for comparison analysis because these newspapers are two of the most important and influential newspapers in the U.S. and are worthy of scholarly attention in media research; having had a long established agenda setting effect on public opinion (Messner & Distaso, 2008; Boyle, 2001).

IV. METHODOLOGY

a. Newspaper Data

Newspaper articles were selected, read, and then coded by paragraph to see if any gender bias existed in news coverage against Palin and toward Biden. To begin the research, a keyword search of the *LexisNexis* database was utilized to locate newspaper articles for analysis. This analysis included news published between September 1 and October 31, 2008. Because Palin's vice presidential bid was revealed at the end of August, the analysis included September through October, the last two months before the election. Using the keywords "Palin" and "Biden" that appeared in the headlines, news reports, editorials, and opinion columns were retrieved from two prominent newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

The New York Times was chosen for analysis because it includes a long history in politics, is probably the most well-known paper in the U.S., and its prestige has been recognized for setting the agenda for national news (Boyle, 2001). *The Washington Post*, the most prominent newspaper in Washington D.C., has close proximity to the national political scene, therefore allowing reporters more insider access. Although considered a regional paper for the D.C. area, *The Washington Post* was chosen because it is also considered as having agenda setting influence on news media's national news coverage (Boyle, 2001). One agenda setting study highlighted *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* for analysis because researchers suggested that the papers, two of the

largest national circulation newspapers in the U.S, are said to have a long established agenda setting effect on public opinion (Messner & Distaso, 2008). With more than a few million daily readers combined, these two papers have a tremendous influence because they are read by the elite as well as other media gatekeepers, who in turn establish the agenda for other news coverage (Messner, & Distaso, 2008). Another study also compared *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. In this research both newspapers were found to have an agenda setting effect on subsequent television network coverage of politics. Boyle (2001) studied agenda-setting effects between campaign advertising and newspaper and television network stories. Overall both of these studies determined that *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are both influential in the United States and worthy of scholarly attention in media agenda-setting research (Messner & Distaso, 2008; Boyle, 2001).

LexisNexis provides easy access and comprehensive access to these two newspapers archives, which is another reason why both newspapers were chosen for analysis. The online search initially produced about 200 Palin articles and about 50 Biden articles. Almost four times as many articles were found about Palin and the goal was to include an equal amount of articles on Palin and Biden. For equivalent quantitative measure, all of the Biden articles were used in this analysis. Using a systematic sampling, one out of every four Palin articles was used for analysis. The total number of articles analyzed was reduced down to a manageable sample of 100 articles. It is important to note that every paragraph within each article was coded as a separate unit of analysis. A total of 1,345 paragraphs were analyzed.

The justification for using editorials and opinion columns in addition to news stories for analysis was based upon the disproportionate amount of Palin articles (200) in comparison to Biden (50). Because Biden had such a small percentage of articles about him, it was in the best interest to include all possible content information about him, whether it was news, editorial, or opinion. Therefore, editorials, opinion columns, and news stories about Palin were also used for analysis. But, it is important to note that readers are susceptible to all newspaper content, whether is it news, editorial, or opinion writings, when obtaining “the whole picture” of a candidate’s portrayal. As gender predispositions may have been thrived within the news and editorial department of these prominent newspapers, it is not unreasonable to combine these three types of newspaper content for analysis.

b. Coding

Each paragraph, as a unit of analysis, within the selected articles was coded, based on the following categories: personal images versus performances of the candidates, policy issues versus personal backgrounds, and feminine versus masculine policy issues. The author and another female graduate student coded the articles after having conducted a number of training sessions and pilot-tests, and after having discussed and agreed upon what might constitute each category. Since both coders were female, any potential gender bias or differences in the coding of categories that could have occurred if one coder was male and the other female was avoided. Inter-coder reliability was estimated by double-coding a random sub-sample (N = 20) of the articles. Inter-coder reliability corrected for agreement by chance (*Scott’s pi*) ranged from .68 (performance) to .81 (personal

background) with an average reliability of .75.

The frequency of references to personal image included mentions about clothing/apparel, hairstyles, make-up, facial expressions, and method of travel (transportation). Performance was coded according to the frequency of references to the candidates' demeanor and performance during the campaign and how they handled the media. References to personal backgrounds were tallied based upon the paragraphs talking about each candidate's educational background, family life, hobbies, economic status, social status, work backgrounds, individual scandals, and friendships.

In the coding scheme, masculine political issues included foreign policy, military, economy, international crisis, crime, and gun control. Issues of education, children, and reproductive rights were coded as feminine policy issues. Social security was considered in this study as a neutral issue, being neither masculine nor feminine, therefore not affecting results if mentioned. Perceptual differences were at a minimum during the initial stages of coding for inter-coder reliability. Some discrepancies that initially occurred included distinguishing between foreign policy, war, and international crisis. But since all of these were considered masculine issues, analysis was still reliable. Children's issues and education were also at times difficult to distinguish, but again these were reliable because the issues were considered part of the feminine issue category. Originally this study used appearance as a category in comparison to performance. But in order to have better specification about appearance which also included mode of transportation (types of vehicles used, for example), appearance was changed to personal image. One similar content analysis by Duerst-Lahti (2006) utilized categories of

personal image, apparel, and personal life and found that news media focused more on these issues when covering the female candidates.

V. FINDINGS

a. Gender Bias: Comparison between Sarah Palin and Joseph Biden

A series of chi-square tests analyzed the differences between news coverage of Palin and Biden in terms of referring to their personal images versus performances (H1), in terms of paying attention to the candidate's personal background versus policy issues (H2), and talking about feminine versus masculine policy issues (H3).

i. Personal Image versus Performance

The first gender bias hypothesis (H1) pertains to references to each candidate's personal image versus performance found in the news reports and editorials of the two national newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Table 1 shows comparisons between candidate's and coverage about their personal image and performance.

Table 1.

Personal Image versus Performance

CANDIDATE	PERSONAL IMAGE	PERFORMANCE	TOTAL
PALIN	49 (18%)	231 (82%)	280 (100%)
BIDEN	6 (5%)	107 (95%)	113 (100%)
TOTAL	55 (14%)	338 (86%)	393 (100%)

($\chi^2 = 10.260, p < .01$)

A total of 280 paragraphs were found to make references to the personal image and/or performance of Palin. Forty-nine paragraphs referred to the governor’s personal image; and 231 mentioned her performance. In regards to Biden, 113 paragraphs mentioned Biden’s personal image and/or performance. From the total 113 paragraphs about Biden, only six referred to his personal image, while 107 mentioned his performance. These findings indicate that although the majority of articles referred to more performances than personal images for both candidates, Palin still had a larger amount of references to personal images than her opponent. A chi-square test confirmed that this difference between the candidates was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 10.260, p < .01$), therefore supporting my first hypothesis (H1).

ii. Policy Issues versus Personal Background

The next gender bias analysis (H2) included references made to policy issues versus personal backgrounds when talking about each candidate (Table 2).

Table 2.

Policy Issues versus Personal Background

CANDIDATE	POLICY ISSUES	P. BACKGROUND	TOTAL
PALIN	197 (34%)	383 (66%)	580 (100%)
BIDEN	86 (51%)	83 (49%)	169 (100%)
TOTAL	283 (38%)	466 (62%)	749 (100%)

($\chi^2 = 15.724, p < .01$)

Concerning specific policy issues and/or personal backgrounds of Palin, of these 580 paragraphs, 197 mentioned policy issues; and 383 talked about Palin’s personal

background. For Biden, 169 paragraphs discussed his policy issues and/or his personal background; 86 talked about his stance on different issues; and 83 referred to his personal background. This difference in news coverage between candidates was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 15.724, p < .01$), supporting the idea that news coverage of Palin, when compared to Biden, was more likely to focus on her personal background than her policy issues. This finding supported the second hypothesis (H2).

iii. Feminine versus Masculine Political Issues

The third gender bias analysis (H3) examined references made to feminine versus masculine political issues about Palin and Biden within the national newspaper articles. Table 3 shows the results comparing each candidate's coverage on masculine and feminine issues.

Table 3.

Feminine versus Masculine Political Issues

CANDIDATE	FEMININE ISSUES	MASCULINE ISSUES	TOTAL
PALIN	49 (24%)	153 (76%)	202 (100%)
BIDEN	6 (7%)	84 (93%)	90 (100%)
TOTAL	55 (19%)	237 (81%)	292 (100%)

($\chi^2 = 12.698, p < .01$)

A total of 202 paragraphs discussed masculine and/or feminine issues when talking about Palin. Of the 202 paragraphs analyzed, 153 made references to masculine issues; and 49 talked about feminine political issues. For Biden, there

were a total of 90 such paragraphs. Of the 90, 84 paragraphs mentioned masculine issues, while only six talked about feminine policy issues. Again, the difference between candidates was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 12.698, p < .01$). These findings well demonstrate that national news coverage of Palin, when compared to Biden, was more likely to pay attention to feminine political issues. My third hypothesis (H3) was therefore supported.

a. Gender Bias: Analysis between NYT and WP

Another series of chi-square tests analyzed data in order to answer Research Question 1 (RQ1). Did any differences exist between *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in the coverage of Palin and Biden? Analysis included if each paper made similar amounts of reference to Palin's and Biden's personal image versus their performance (Table 4a & Table 4b); how often the newspapers paid attention to each candidate's personal background versus policy issues (Table 5a & Table 5b) and if the newspapers discussed feminine and masculine issues similarly when talking about each candidate (Table 6a, Table 6b). Analysis compared *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to investigate any differences in the coverage of each candidate.

i. Personal Image versus Performance

Personal image and performance categories were compared in the NYT and the WP by their coverage of Palin and Biden. Was coverage of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* similar when reporting on personal image and her performance?

Table 4a.

Palin's Personal Image versus Performance

NEWSPAPER	PERSONAL IMAGE	PERFORMANCE	TOTAL
NYT	19 (23%)	65 (77%)	84 (100%)
WP	26 (15%)	146 (85%)	172 (100%)
TOTAL	45 (18%)	211 (82%)	256 (100%)

($\chi^2 = 1.706$, $df=1$, $p = n.s.$)

Of the 172 articles from *The Washington Post*, 26 mentioned Palin's personal image and 146 mentioned her performance. Both newspapers had higher percentages of performance mentions than personal image mentions about each candidate. As a result the percentages between each newspaper's mentioning of personal image versus performance was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1.706$, $df=1$, $p = 0.1916$).

The next analysis tested if *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were similar in their coverage about Biden's performance and personal image. Results from analyzing 108 paragraphs on these two categories are reported below.

Table 4b.

Biden's Personal Image versus Performance

NEWSPAPER	PERSONAL IMAGE	PERFORMANCE	TOTAL
NYT	2 (10%)	17 (90%)	19 (100%)
WP	4 (5%)	85 (95%)	89 (100%)
TOTAL	6 (6%)	102 (94%)	108 (100%)

($\chi^2 = 0.240$, $df=1$, $p = n.s.$)

Most paragraphs from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* mentioned something about Biden’s performance. Only four from the WP mentioned his personal image. Results demonstrate that Biden’s performance was reported more so by *The Washington Post* than by *The New York Times*. From *The New York Times*, there were only two mentions about Biden’s personal image. Both newspapers had higher percentages of performance mentions than personal image mentions, as found in Palin coverage. An overall analysis shows that percentages between each newspaper’s mentioning of personal image versus performance was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.240, df=1, p = n.s.$).

ii. Policy Issues versus Personal Background

It was also postulated that *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* would similarly report Palin’s personal background and more so than her policy issues. My analysis showed that the regional paper, *The Washington Post*, reported more on Palin’s policy issues than the national newspaper *The New York Times* as shown in Table 5a.

Table 5a.

Palin’s Policy Issues versus Personal Background

NEWSPAPER	POLICY ISSUES	P. BACKGROUND	TOTAL
NYT	66 (17%)	317 (83%)	383 (100%)
WP	124 (44%)	161 (56%)	285 (100%)
TOTAL	190 (28%)	478 (72%)	668 (100%)

($\chi^2 = 54.150, df=1, p < .001$)

The Washington Post had nearly twice as many mentions about Palin’s policy issues than *The New York Times*. The NYT had a small amount of mentions about Palin’s policy issues compared to the mentions about Palin’s personal background. The comparison between each newspaper’s mentioning of policy issues versus personal background was statistically significant ($p < .001$).

As similarly tested about Palin in Table 5a, Table 5b examines if *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* reported similarly about Biden’s policy issues and personal background. Biden received a total of 192 paragraphs from both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* that mentioned his policy issues and personal background as shown in Table 5b.

Table 5b.

Biden’s Policy Issues versus Personal Background

NEWSPAPER	POLICY ISSUES	P. BACKGROUND	TOTAL
NYT	14 (19%)	60 (81%)	74 (100%)
WP	89 (75%)	29 (25%)	118 (100%)
TOTAL	103 (54%)	89 (46%)	192 (100%)

($\chi^2 = 54.143, df=1, p < .001$)

A smaller percentage of NYT articles were about Biden’s policy issues than his personal background. The WP included more mentions about Biden’s policy issues and personal background than the NYT, including 89 paragraphs about his policy issues and 29 about his personal background. Therefore it can be concluded that the WP was more

likely than the NYT to mention Biden’s policy issues. Each newspaper’s mentioning of Biden’s personal background also varied. The NYT had a higher percentage of personal background mentions than policy issues mentions about Biden. The difference in percentages between two papers was statistically significant ($p < .001$).

iii. Feminine versus Masculine Political Issues

For review, masculine political issues in this study include foreign policy, military, economy, international crisis, crime, and gun control. Issues of education, children, and reproductive rights were coded as feminine policy issues. Did *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* report similarly about feminine issues and masculine issues when presenting Palin? Results from this analysis are shown below in Table 6a.

Table 6a.

Palin’s Feminine versus Masculine Issues

NEWSPAPER	MASCULINE ISSUES	FEMININE ISSUES	TOTAL
NYT	38 (58%)	28 (42%)	66 (100%)
WP	111 (90%)	13 (10%)	124 (100%)
TOTAL	149 (78%)	41 (22%)	190 (100%)

($\chi^2 = 24.114, df=1, p < .001$)

The Washington Post devoted a higher amount of coverage to masculine issues than to feminine issues when presenting Palin, but both papers talked about hard issues more so with Palin. *The New York Times* was more likely than *The Washington Post* to talk about feminine issues over masculine issues when presenting Palin. In this final analysis

shown in Table 6b, I make a comparison between the two newspapers when it comes to their coverage associating Biden more with masculine than feminine issues.

Table 6b.

Biden's Feminine versus Masculine Issues

NEWSPAPER	MASCULINE ISSUES	FEMININE ISSUES	TOTAL
NYT	14 (100%)	0 (0%)	14 (100%)
WP	84 (94%)	5 (6%)	89 (100%)
TOTAL	98 (95%)	5 (5%)	103 (100%)

($\chi^2 = 0.058$, $df=1$, $p = n.s.$)

Every one of *The New York Times* paragraphs mentioned Biden with masculine issues and most of *The Washington Post* mentioned Biden with masculine issues. A very small amount mentioned feminine issues when presenting Biden. Therefore, both newspapers had a preference of reporting Biden with masculine issues, as they also did for Palin.

VI. DISCUSSION

This content analysis of two prominent newspapers revealed that gender bias against Alaskan Governor and vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin was present in the 2008 presidential campaign coverage. Overall, newspapers did focus more on Palin's personal image, performance, personal background, and feminine political issues rather than associating Palin with her performance, policy issues, and positions on masculine issues. Although results indicate that both newspapers presented Palin with masculine issues, Palin was under extensive media scrutiny, especially about her personal image, personal life, and work background; and more so than Biden. This focus on female personal image hinders a female's chance for political office by not focusing on the important issues and reinforces the theory that gender bias against female candidates still exists today in news coverage (Bystrom, Robertson, & Banwart, 2001). The following section discusses each finding in more detail.

a. Personal Image and Performance

Findings show that the national newspaper coverage of Palin, compared to Biden, was more likely to cover her personal image rather than her performance (H1), thereby supporting the idea that a gender bias did exist in national newspaper coverage against Palin in comparison to Biden. These findings do support literature (Duerst-Lahti, 2006; Bystrom, 2006; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991) pertaining to media portrayals of female political candidates that shows consistently how women are viewed as different; not as

strong by their media attention being about their personal image. News reporter's different treatment of male and female candidates might have in the past and may still today result in significant repercussions for voters' knowledge about and possible support of a woman candidate (Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991).

a. Personal Background and Policy Issues

Gender bias existed in news reporting of vice presidential candidates Palin and Biden with regard to personal background and policy issues. Newspaper coverage of Palin compared to Biden focused more on Palin's personal background rather than her policy issues, thereby supporting this gender bias hypothesis. These findings support the literature review about gender bias against women candidates and toward Western male ideals that men are *stronger* (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Bystrom, Robertson, & Banwart, 2001; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991; Devitt, 2002). Whenever a woman is known more by her hairstyle and brand of expensive suits rather than if she supports socialized medicine and health care for all children, she can be objectified and may not be taken as seriously as her male counterpart (Fredrickson, & Roberts, 1997).

b. Feminine and Masculine Issues

This analysis concerned masculine issues, such as foreign policy, military, economy, and gun control, and feminine political issues, including education, children, and reproductive rights. Contrary to the stereotypical patterns of covering female candidates, a large majority of Palin's coverage was devoted to talking about masculine issues. In comparison to Joseph Biden, however, it is important to point out that a significantly greater portion of Palin's articles were devoted to talking about feminine

political issues. Reid (2007) suggested that the myth of the presidency includes a presence of power and authority that surrounds the figure of the president that he or she is, unlike the average person, is somehow slightly more than human. When the media frames a female candidate as “just one of the folk” then it can be insinuated that this woman is neither unique nor qualified enough to become a president or a vice president.

VII. LIMITATIONS

Before further discussing my findings, it is necessary to point out several limitations of this research. First and most importantly, even though I found that the Palin articles were focusing more on less substantial matters (e.g. personal images, personal background); it is not very clear from the findings here whether this happened, as I hypothesized, because of the prevailing gender bias in the media. It is equally possible that newspapers did focus on these personal matters not because she was a woman but because she was a newcomer to national politics and her personal life was not well known to the public. In this regard, future research may need to compare news coverage of Palin with that of another known female candidate, such as Hillary Clinton, as a way to tease out the newcomer factor. If the well known female candidate is still covered largely in terms of personal matters, this finding may well support the gender bias interpretation. On the other hand, if the well known candidate receives significantly less coverage of personal matters, it is very likely that the biased coverage of Sarah Palin comes from newcomer factor, not from the gender factor. This must be an important matter to further explore and explicate, but may be beyond the scope of this thesis.

Findings indicate that there is considerable inconsistency between *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in terms of gender bias (RQ). Of the six comparisons made, three indicated a significant difference between the papers, with *The New York Times* being significantly more gender-biased. This inconsistency raises concern about

the reliability of the analysis, further limiting the generalizability of the findings. The findings of this thesis should be interpreted with caution as the external validity and the reliability of the findings are considerably limited. The readers should also be reminded that the papers analyzed were all relatively “liberal” papers; and thus it is possible that the bias against Sarah Palin was somewhat overestimated in this study given the fact that both papers publicly endorsed Barack Obama for the president in 2008.

Another limitation is that this study did not make a distinction between editorial/opinion columns and news reports, which were instead lumped together in the same analysis. Different from the fact-based news articles, editorials and opinion columns tend to provide more subjective and opinionated articles, suggesting that these columns may be somewhat more gender-biased than other forms of news articles. It will be of great interest to future research to look at different types of news articles in separate analyses and see if there are any differences in terms of gender or other biases, which will provide a more meaningful and valid way to explore gender bias in newspapers.

The defining and coding of masculine, feminine, and neutral political policies and issues proved to be a vast and lengthy task. Definitions of masculine *strong* issues were well defined (such as foreign policy, the economy and the military). Definitions of feminine *soft* issues were also well defined (such as children’s issues and healthcare). But because so many political issues exist within each studied category it was difficult to decide which category to place them, if to use them at all. For example, when coding for masculine and feminine political policies for each vice-presidential candidate, some political issues, such as gay or racial rights, were not defined as masculine, feminine, or

neutral, and thus not labeled on the coding sheet. These political issues were not coded, left out of the study, and therefore considered a limitation to this content analysis.

A distinction was not made in this analysis of newspaper editorial and news content. The reason was that this study focused on all content that included “Palin” or “Biden” in the headline, therefore an inclusion of both editorial and news was made. All reporter stories and staff editorials include news information that is placed throughout the newspapers therefore readers peruse all content and then make subsequent opinions of their own about these candidates. Future research that distinguishes between editorials and news articles may be useful to dissect if news reporters were biased against Palin and female candidates, or whether editorials seemed critical and biased against Palin. Details about the type of criticism that took place, such as the amount of news that was dedicated to Palin’s family problems and the amount of news coverage about Palin supporting drilling in Alaska would be interesting to study.

Another limitation to this study includes the inconsistent amount of newspaper articles written about Palin and Biden. The majority of the articles originally found in the newspapers were about Palin, therefore percentages were used for the coded articles to compare each candidate within each category, such as the number mentions about Palin’s performance and percentages, and so on. Although Palin was a state governor going into the election, she was a newcomer to and unfamiliar with the national political news scene and the news media intentionally wanted to gather new information about the candidate.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the United States being a predominately male hegemonic society, gender bias prevailed against Palin during the 2008 presidential election news coverage. It seemed that a struggle with sexism existed for women who dedicated their life and time toward public service. Palin, and in general all women in national politics, vied not just for winning political office, but also for political equality between men and women, an obstacle that men in politics do not face. By covering male and female political candidates unequally, the news media may have obstructed women's likelihood of success in the political arena (Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991). Because Americans are only familiar with having a man leading their country, anything else would be against the dominant ideology that society is used to. Voters in general are reluctant to elect a female presidential or vice presidential candidate because she is portrayed and viewed as less able and experienced to supervise the military, manage war, and oversee the economy. Schiffer (2006) noted that bias in the American press has been a topic of discussion among politicians and established political observers for a long time. If gender bias is still prevalent today, as indicated in past research, it is a hindrance to the female candidate and leverage for the opposing male candidate.

According to gender bias research women politicians must act assertively to be noticed. But if a woman is perceived as threatening and act too assertively, then this candidate is more likely than their male counterparts to be criticized, and voters may

dismiss them as a viable candidate—a “double bind” trap that condemns women no matter how they are portrayed (Jamieson, 1995).

This research supports previous research claiming that gender bias in news media has been and continues to be a problem for women in politics. The problem lies with the focus on women’s personal image, a ubiquitous attention that affects perceptions of women and personal abilities as leaders (Falk, 2008; Watson & Gordon, 2003; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009).

Gender bias in news stories may have hindered Palin’s candidacy by associating Palin with feminine traits and feminine issues, such as children’s issues, education, and reproductive rights, instead of male-associated political issues deemed more politically significant, such as the economy, war, and international issues. One male conservative writer, Scarborough (2009), wrote that Palin was the first conservative on the national political scene in more than 20 years who appealed to a large demographic group of young voters.

Palin had an astounding rise to power that should be commended by feminists, Scarborough said. Palin went from being a mother to a city mayor, and then to Alaska’s governor. Although Palin is pro-life, a stance mostly associated with the conservative party, she still represents female liberalism against male hegemony and most traditional female roles. But because she is a conservative, many feminists were foremost in the negative dialogue.

Results from this content analysis of two prominent newspapers indicate that there was gender bias against Palin as communicated in news coverage during the 2008

presidential election. Palin was under extensive media scrutiny, especially about her personal image, personal life, family life, and work background; much more so than Biden, who was teamed with Obama, the extremely popular presidential candidate. Biden was an established politician on the national scene, and scrutiny of his personal image or associations with feminine issues was almost nonexistent in comparison to Palin, therefore creating imbalance. News coverage focused more on Palin's personal image, as it has with other past political female candidates, such as Ferraro in 1984. This bias prevalent in national newspaper coverage might have objectified Palin and decreased her strength as a viable political candidate in comparison to Biden.

Palin was a new political candidate who associated herself with the "hockey mom" and the "lipstick on the pig" phrases. Therefore it may be hypothesized that any new political female candidate to the national scene should downplay her personal image which if centered on by the media, can hinder their candidacy because important policy issues are not the focus.

Journalist McCollam (2009) is less concerned in hindsight with whether news media may have rallied around one candidate versus another. Aside from gender bias, the real issue that McCollam raises is a test for news audiences to read and watch news from outside personal political leanings (and against the traditional male dominated news focus) in order to gather news from more than just one side and to have improved perceptions with diverse opinions. McCollam said he watched *Fox News*, browses *The National Review Online*, and daily grazed at *The Drudge Report*. This news gathering method may have been tedious for this journalist, but it enabled McCollam to have

insight into the conservative media. The dismissal of news simply because it originates in an antagonistic sector may be human but it's also shortsighted, McCollam argued. This shortsightedness prevalent in news gathers may lead to “informational provincialism where anyone not from your ideological tribe is viewed as irredeemably untrustworthy. In a country founded on shared ideas, not a shared identity, I can't think of a bias more un-American than that” (McCollam, 2009, p.18).

More than 2,400 political campaign stories analyzed by the Project for Excellence in Journalism revealed not a bias in favor of the Obama-Biden campaign, as much as the negative coverage of McCain and Palin in comparison (McCollam, 2009). Many people believe that on NBC's Saturday Night Live, Tina Fey's depictions of Palin helped shape the public's impression of Palin, McCollam added. Although Obama's campaign was revolutionary in terms of the advancement of U.S. civil rights ideology, the momentous news and entertainment coverage was at times difficult to distinguish. James Carey (1989) in his writings on media and society warned that participatory democracy may be threatened by our inundation by the media of instant information, by “stupefying spectacle” and the confusion of news and entertainment presented in mass media. Because Obama was admired by mass media and voters alike, news and entertainment media were disseminating top selling stories of Obama. Given this fascination of Obama, some journalists covering the national political scene might have been less willing to report in-depth stories with negative connotations about Obama. And because of this pro-Obama favoritism, news media might have been biased toward the Obama and Biden campaign, resulting in a bias against the McCain and Palin campaign.

This research furthers the argument that, in order for a female candidate to receive equivalent coverage to her male counterpart, a change must be made in political information disseminated by news media-not necessarily in the quantity of coverage, but in the *quality* of coverage. Perhaps news reporters can ask themselves before reporting on a female candidate, “Would I report this same information about a male candidate?” Another possible question to correct this gender bias is asking “Is this politically newsworthy information or just entertainment that should be saved for its own genre of media coverage?” A distinction between news and entertainment coverage (i.e. between a female candidate’s stance on policy issues and her favorite clothing designer) should be initiated by journalists and other leaders in the mass media.

The question remains if the U.S. after the historical election of our first African-American man to the presidency will ever be ready to elect a female president. Many people believe that the United States will see its first woman president in the twenty-first century. Han and Heldman (2007) suggest that within the last five years portrayals in popular culture discourse may be helpful in at least introducing the notion of difference from traditional male hegemonic roles. The rethinking of race and gender within the office of the presidency are cultural symbols (Han & Heldman, 2007) that may prepare the U.S. for another historical presidential race within the next decade.

Only when a woman’s campaign is based upon what she stands for and not what shoes she stands in will there ever be an improvement from the gender bias that exists today. When female political figures are not objectified, existing when news media focus

on their feminine traits, will female then have equal grounds on which to hold a viable campaign, resulting in equal coverage and an increase in women elected to office.

IX. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It would be worthwhile for future research to also examine if a partisan bias existed in newspapers *toward* the Obama-Biden campaign. More specifically a content analysis could categorize and calculate the types of policy issues covered and associated with the Obama-Biden campaign; a offense approach to the Iraq War, socialized healthcare, environmental concerns, and the deficit. Likewise another study could be done with coverage of the McCain-Palin campaign. These topics could include the environment, social security, and a defense approach to the Iraq War. Better yet it would be interesting to decipher how environmental issues are portrayed with each candidate and associated with each party within the news political discourse.

Does personal image matter for both men and women candidates? If image does matter, in what respect is it important to voters? Using content analysis, communication researchers could incorporate the issue of height and how the tall male candidates running for president have historically been more successful. This study could look at presidential races and the personal images of candidates as portrayed in the media from a historical point of view. A comparison analysis between men and women would study what the most important personal image traits are that successful men and women candidates have possessed.

This thesis was limited in its ability to label news coverage as negative or positive. Research on media bias and political discourse would benefit from having some sort of

study about negative and positive labeling of candidates. Although the difficulty, according to McCollam, is what is perceived as negative or positive media bias, is based upon a media critic's opinion. For example, if the news is reporting conservative issues, such as tax cuts, and in a positive manner, than a liberal may consider the news bias toward conservatives. And if the news leans toward typically liberal issues such as the environment and recycling, then conservatives may construe the news as having a liberal bias.

An analysis of how many times a candidate is associated with specific hot topics, such as the environment, could also prove to be interesting. This may include the amount of times Palin's support for oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWF) was mentioned and how many times she was associated with her support of bio fuel and renewable energy. This information could be compared to how much Biden was associated with his opposition to drilling for oil in the ANWF and his support for bio fuel and renewable resources.

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