

# Bound: Print Journalism's Framing of Female Candidates in the 2008 Presidential Race According to the 'Double Bind' Theory

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## Abstract

*This research looked at the portrayal and framing of two women politicians—Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton—and their media framing. It attempted to identify if these women were framed in the “double bind theory,” which theorizes that “women are expected to act like men, and are then criticized for just that” (Myers, 2008). When women in leadership positions conform to traditional female roles, they are seen as “too soft to be effective,” but when they defy society’s norms, “they are seen as ‘too tough’” (Myers, 2008). To understand how these women were framed, articles from three major newspapers—the Washington Post, the New York Times, and USA Today— were analyzed. These articles showed patterns in phraseology, article placement, valance, article subject, and positive and negative descriptors. This research showed that while the coverage of female candidates has improved, the three newspapers are still applying different standards than their male counterparts. They were usually represented as extreme figures, falling in the category of “too hard” or “too soft.” Also, women’s families were included in a large percent of their media coverage.*

## I. Introduction

With the recent push for equal rights for women in politics and the election of more female public officials, the image of women in politics has garnered greater attention and changed drastically. In the 1970s, female candidates were often told that they should be “shown as assertive rather than aggressive, attractive without being a sexpot, self-confident but not domineering” (Williams, 1998). The image that developed was a passive and cookie-cutter politician who did not make waves or cause trouble and was still attractive and fashionable enough to be a trophy wife. Today, women are often encouraged to “craft a message and a public persona that persuades party, pundits, and public that she can be as clear and independent a decision maker as any man, but more caring and trustworthy” (Williams, 1998). This current view of a female politician’s image is still not a radical one. Overall, the ideal image is one of a balance between masculine and feminine traits—the best of both worlds. This image has proved hard to achieve, however, as many women in politics fall to one extreme or the other.

This research focuses on the framing of Hillary Rodham Clinton and Sarah Palin in print journalism. These women have been heavily followed by the media, and represent different political images and media frames. In communications, framing is best described by Robert M. Entman of George Washington University as “select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in

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\* **Keywords:** Women, politics, 2008 election, framing, double bind theory

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such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993). Simply put, framing is what a politician’s public relations staff wants the candidate’s image to be. Framing is also considered an “essential part” of news reporting (Heldman, 2000). However, studies have shown that newspapers tend to stereotype female candidates by “emphasizing ‘feminine traits’ and ‘feminine issues’” (Bystrom, Robertson, & Banwart, 2001).

Journalists often use gender stereotypes to evaluate the capacity of certain candidates to handle certain issues: men are usually associated with economics, crime, and defense issues, while women usually are paired with healthcare or education. Journalists’ coverage also tends to emphasize the “feminine” traits that mark a female candidate: personal lives, personalities, appearances, children, and marital status (Major & Coleman, 2008). Previous literature suggests that women receive less coverage about electoral issues and more coverage about issues of appearance, family, or personal life, but recent studies have found the opposite. Journalists appear to be diverging from the “stereotypical coverage of hair, clothing, and physical features” and have altered their style to attempt to represent female candidates in the same way as male candidates. They have achieved some progress when it comes to coverage of female candidates, but still stereotype by the type of story they write or the issues covered. The problem arises when this stereotyping comes off as negative, even when the report is positive (Major & Coleman, 2008).

Many studies show the differences in media coverage of male and female politicians in electronic and print media. One study in 2000 showed that newspaper reporters “devoted much more attention to the personal lives, personalities, and appearances of women as compared with men” and that journalists “often ask women politicians questions that they don’t ask men” (Bystrom, Robertson, & Banwart, 2001). In a quantitative analysis of newspaper coverage, female candidates received more coverage about children and marital status than men.

Journalists try (or claim to try) to present news coverage in a fair and balanced way without bias. Studies have shown that despite this effort, they cannot break away from certain psychological processes that are inherent in human nature (Major & Coleman, 2008). Many studies have shown that there are certain stereotypes present in media coverage of women (Major & Coleman, 2008). These stereotypes are often unconsciously included in coverage, and based off of attitudes, values, or beliefs. Stereotypes can occur unintentionally, and are so embedded in a person’s thought process that they may be impossible to abandon. On the other hand, conscious slanted coverage is sometimes encouraged by outside sources such as advertisers, businesses, government, news room policies, the political elite, or economics (Major & Coleman, 2008). Journalists may feel that propagating these stereotypes keeps their jobs secure. Even still, sometimes journalists are just conveying the image constructed and provided by the candidate herself (Major & Coleman, 2008).

While the media may not act as the only deciding factor in elections, it has been shown that they do play an “ever increasing role” in determining election outcome (Niedermeier, 2009). National political campaigns rely on various channels to contact constituents, and in 99% of cases this contact is made through the mass media. Therefore, the candidate’s presentation and looks have become increasingly important. Niedermeier notes that “not very attractive candidates are often left on the side in the internal party selection. How a candidate can show himself to the media is ... important” (Niedermeier, 2009). The media, Niedermeier claims, can “build a politician as well as dismantle him/her.”

In a study that examines Hillary Clinton’s time as first lady and her campaign as senator, Karrin Vasby Anderson claims that gender is still a “significant but complicated variable in U.S. politics” (Anderson, 2002). The office of the United States president is a gendered post, she claims, and in 2000 the office was “just as gendered as it has always been” (Anderson, 2002). Anderson argues that women in politics are constantly battling a “double bind,” a conflict of role expectations that “trap women ... curtail their opinions and circumscribe their power” (Anderson, 2002). This double bind tends to affect different candidates in varying capacities. For Clinton, she went from her frame as a “woman” in the role of first lady who was evaluated by the ways in which she positively or negatively influenced femininity, to being viewed and critiqued primarily as a candidate at the national level—but rarely both at the same time (Anderson, 2002).

Another non-empirical look at the “double bind” theory comes from former White House Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers. Myers, the first female White House Press Secretary, served in the Clinton administration. She authored the book *Why Women Should Rule The World* as a critical look at the challenges women face in a male-dominated political arena, and the benefits of having women in leadership roles. She writes that due to the “double bind” theory, “women are expected to act like men, and are then criticized for just that”

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(Myers, 2008). She explains that when women in leadership positions conform to traditional female roles, they are seen as “too soft to be effective,” but when they defy society’s norms, “they are seen as ‘too tough’” (Myers, 2008). Recently, however, there has been an increase in the number of women in leadership positions that refer to their experiences in motherhood as a “training ground for leadership” and a “metaphor for leadership behavior” (Myers, 2008). This study, done by Wellesley College’s Center for Women, shows that women are now more comfortable speaking about their struggles with balancing motherhood and professional life, and are aware of the value of motherhood as a leadership role. Myers also writes about the fact that women are evaluated differently than men in the campaigning process. According to Myers:

Voters focus on a female candidate’s performance under pressure, knowledge of issues, and personal presentation. Voters are more judgmental about a female candidate’s performance and less forgiving of her mistakes than they are of her male counterpart’s. ... In other words, voters assume men are tough enough. But women have to prove it. (Myers, 2008)

In a study by the research company *Catalyst*, the double bind theory is broken down into three problem categories women face. The first is an “extreme perception” where women are “never just right” for a role. They are seen as too far on the end of the spectrum to satisfy the goals of a job. Another issue is that women are faced with higher standards and lower rewards than their male counterparts. Women are often expected to work doubly hard as men to “prove” their leadership abilities. When women accomplish these leadership goals, they are not rewarded with the same promotions or financial incentives as their male counterparts. Finally, the *Catalyst* said that females who “exhibit traditionally valued leadership behaviors such as assertiveness, are perceived to be competent but not personable or well liked” (Double bind dilemmas for women, 2007).

The different ways in which women are judged, combined with the double bind theory, make it essentially impossible for a female candidate to fulfill the role of an acceptable candidate. Even though companies and governments with women in leadership roles are more successful, women are still less considered “minorities” in these areas (Myers, 2008).

## **Research Questions**

The purpose of this research is to examine the double bind theory in the context of the 2008 election by analyzing the campaigns of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and Governor Sarah Palin. The questions this research aims to answer include:

RQ1: Were the candidates of the 2008 election framed in the double bind?

RQ2: If so, how were the women depicted?

By exploring the ways in which the candidate’s image was portrayed in the light of the double bind, this research attempted to identify the possible repercussions of this representation.

## **II. Methods**

To explore and compare the portrayals of women in politics, this research looks at two different politically active women: Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton. Both of these women have recently staged campaigns at a national level, and have received heavy coverage by the media. With the advent of 24-hour journalism due to the Internet, portable cellular devices, and 24-hour news stations, coverage of these women pervaded media outlets for the span of their campaigns.

This research uses print articles from three elite newspapers to examine the context in which these women were framed. The newspapers included the New York Times, USA Today, and the Washington Post. Each newspaper article was found using a LexisNexis search. The articles that were published sometime in 2008 and contained the woman’s name in the headline or lead were selected. Only news and features articles were used, with editorials and opinion pieces left out because of the biased nature of their content. Articles that only covered an entertainer’s portrayal of the woman, such as Tina Fey’s portrayal of Sarah Palin, were also excluded because they did not offer the merit of election coverage and the promise of “balanced” journalism.

Each woman was viewed in different time frames because they both ran for political office at different periods within the last two years:

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## **Hillary Clinton**

News articles were analyzed from the announcement of Clinton's presidential campaign on Jan. 20, 2007, until Obama was nominated for the Democratic ticket at the Democratic National Convention on Aug. 27, 2008. The starting date of Jan. 20 was chosen because of her switch from a local senator to a national campaigner for the presidency of the United States. Her public relations team had to change its entire plan of action to campaign on a national scale instead of campaigning for her senate seat in New York. The ending date for Clinton's materials—Aug. 27—was chosen because it was the end of her campaign to the American public for the presidential office.

## **Sarah Palin**

News articles of Sarah Palin were analyzed beginning on the night of her acceptance speech, Sept. 3, 2008. On this date, she went from Alaskan governor to a figure of national prominence as the first woman Republican vice presidential candidate. The analysis of articles concluded on Nov. 4, 2008, when McCain officially ended his campaign for president.

## **Coding**

Each article was coded using a coding sheet. Categories were created for article placement, gender of the writer, professional sources, interviews, words used to describe the candidate, pertinent quotes, references to family life, references to marriage or spouse, references to sexual allure/body or clothes, and overall valence of the article as a whole. Categories also included headlines, leads, and persuasive features such as sources quoted and experts referenced. Additionally, phraseology was reviewed.

## **III. Findings**

### **Sarah Palin**

After coding of the articles concerning Sarah Palin, the two most salient findings were:

- The article topics focused more on personal traits and characteristics than they did on election issues such as foreign policy, taxes and spending, social ideals, or campaign finance issues.
- References to Sarah Palin's family life, notably her children and husband, were more frequent than references to her looks, clothes, body, or sexual allure.

Most of the articles written about Palin focused on the personal aspects of her life. Out of the three publications reviewed, 36 percent of the articles featured stories about Palin's personal life, with topics including personal qualities, morality and corruption issues, trustworthiness, and character issues. These articles often focused on her role as a mother, her children, her connection with the Down's syndrome community, her membership in the church, and the "Troopergate" scandal. In all three of the newspapers, the number of stories coded as "personal" exceeded any other type of story.

Some of the stories about Palin's personal life were veiled under a larger issue, like campaign finance or social issues, but careful coding revealed the overall theme of the article concerned Palin's personal life. For example, in one article in *USA Today* on Sept. 12, 2008, began as if it were investigating the readiness of Palin to be the President. An article titled, "Palin wired to be VP, President if need be," interviewed three expert sources about Palin's history in the foreign policy field. After the initial first few paragraphs, however, the story turned to pinpoint Palin's strong Christian beliefs, quoting her as saying, "Our national leaders are sending U.S. soldiers on a task that is from God," and as repeatedly referring to the war in Iraq as a "mission." The word "mission" brings about religious connotations that further the reputation of heavily conservative Palin as a fanatic Christian. This image is bolstered when, in another article published by *USA Today* on the same day, Joseph Pika of the University of Delaware's political science program says of Palin, "She's a gun-toting, pro-life, and a religious conservative ... She's scary to some people and a kind of figure to be respected to others."

Other stories blatantly focus on Palin's personal life. One *Washington Post* article published on Sept. 11, 2008, features quotes from mothers who identify with Palin's struggle to raise a family, work, and maintain

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a relationship with her husband. These women see Palin as “just as flawed as we are,” and the writer classifies Palin as “a symbol” for working mothers. Stories overtly focusing on Palin’s personal life often use words such as “flawed” and “just like us” while interviewing mostly working females with children. The *New York Times* uses a similar approach in an article published on Sept. 7, 2008, titled “Soccer moms welcome their hockey-loving sisters to political arena.” This article uses the familiar persona of the “soccer mom,” such vital voters for candidates in previous elections, to help frame the persona of a traditional “hockey mom,” as Palin describes herself. Interviewees, all soccer mothers, recognize that Palin’s time as a mother of athletes creates a “difference [in] how I connect with her” and says, “I’m like you.”

A different article, published by the *New York Times* on Oct. 19, 2008, discusses Palin’s appeal to men, noting the sexual undertones of some of her campaigning and the reactions of voters. It contained very little mention of Palin’s political stances or major political issues. This article, which interviewed mostly men, contains quotes such as “She’s so beautiful. . . . I came here to look at her” and “Marry Me, Sarah!” This article, while as a whole positive in connotation, uses words such as “unserious,” “uncurious” and “unusual nature” to describe Palin’s candidacy. When describing Palin herself, the author used words like “a can-do-caretaker” and “striking,” and made note of her quote describing her husband as “a guy who knows how to work with his hands.” When considered together, these descriptors paint a picture of a sexually charged candidate who rallies male attention by using a mix of physical allure and housewife-charm. This image is perpetuated in an article by the *New York Times* on Sept. 12, 2008, titled “Back off, GI Joe,” that interviews the creator of “Sarah Palin action figures.” In this short article, the author mentions that the figures based on Palin are “muscular” and that different versions are outfitted as a businesswoman, a superhero, and a school-girl. These images of Palin were obviously created to be sexual.

Another finding that ties in with the emphasis placed on Sarah Palin’s personal life was the number of articles that referenced her children or her husband. Out of the three papers combined, 40 percent of all articles featured references to Palin’s children, with some articles focusing on them entirely. This aspect of Sarah Palin was stressed much more than stories about her looks or clothes. Only 8 percent of stories mentioned Palin’s looks, another 8 percent mentioned sexual allure, 8 percent also mentioned her clothes, and only one article commented outright on Palin’s body. Journalists clearly consciously or unconsciously chose details and stories that emphasized the role of Palin in a family setting. One such article appeared in the *New York Times* on Sept. 12, 2008. Titled “A way of life for Alaskans on skates,” this article focused almost completely on Palin’s oldest son, Track, and chronicled his life in the hockey rink. Palin, while mentioned as a satellite figure, did not play a large role in this story. Sources interviewed included family friends, Track’s hockey coach, and relatives of teammates. In another article, published on Sept. 7, 2008, the *Washington Post* explores how Palin’s children have fit into her political views and busy schedule. Titled, “Palin’s family has always held a place in her politics,” this article uses interviews to explain how a “working mother” and “maverick with a very large family in tow” can also be a “perfectly coifed professional woman” who runs the state of Alaska. Also in regards to the way a family fits in with the title of governor, a *Washington Post* article published on the front page on Sept. 9, 2008, discusses how Sarah Palin billed the state of Alaska for her family’s travel to government functions, not an uncommon practice. The headline, “Palin billed state for nights spent at home; Taxpayers also funded family’s travel,” implies that excessive amounts of state tax dollars were spent on Palin’s large family, but the article looks at the issue critically and neutrally, and gives Palin credit for trying to cut costs. The author even goes as far as to quote Kim Garner, Alaska’s state finance director, saying how “She flies coach and encourages her cabinet to fly coach as well.” It can be inferred that the negative connotation of the headline was used as a way to get readers to examine an otherwise unimportant issue to the campaign.

Other times, Palin’s children are simply mentioned in stories focusing on other topics. For example, one article published in *USA Today* on Sept. 4, 2008, titled “Sarah makes landfall in St. Paul; VP Pick focuses on energy—and jabs at Obama,” focuses on Palin’s vice presidential debate with Obama. Palin talks about her children and says:

I’m just your average hockey mom who signed up for the PTA because I wanted to make my kids public education better.

Another article, published on Sept. 3, 2008 and titled “McCain strategist blasts media; top aide says news orgs are ‘on a mission to destroy’ Palin,” looks at the media exposure of Palin in the first days of her campaign. The author notes that in media coverage, “the media is asking more questions about Palin’s pregnant daughter than about Obama’s real estate deal with Tony Rezko, who was recently convicted on cor-

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ruption charges,” and that there is a constant debate about “whether a mother with a pregnant daughter and four other children can effectively function as vice president.” An article on the front page of the *Washington Post* on Sept. 22, 2008, titled “First Dude Todd Palin illustrates Alaska’s blend of private and public,” asks that same question by using a quote from a voter named Tom Whitstine, saying:

If Sarah’s running around the state and Todd’s off conducting state business, who’s looking after the children?

The mentioning of Palin’s children in these articles does not add to the story, and in most cases is used as a descriptor of Palin herself. For example, many articles use descriptors such as “hockey mom,” “44-year-old mother of five” and “mother” when introducing Palin, a framing technique that points out her femininity and separates her from her masculine counterparts.

Palin’s husband was mentioned less than her children, but was still recorded in 20 percent of the articles. One article was even specifically written about Todd Palin. The story “A day at the races” published by the *New York Times* focuses completely on Todd Palin’s local fame in Alaska for being a snowmobile racer for Arctic Cat, a company specializing in snow equipment. Other times, he is mentioned as Alaska’s “first dude” or as Sarah Palin’s escort. Articles mentioning Todd include the all of the stories about “Troopergate,” and how he did not honor the request of a court to appear and testify about his involvement. Articles in all three papers focus on the “Troopergate” scandal, involving Sarah Palin’s sister and ex-brother-in-law named Mike Wooten. These articles explore the ethics inquiry into Palin’s accused harassment and dismissal of Alaskan State police commissioner Walter Monnegan, and only mention the familial connection with Wooten briefly.

Overall, the two largest findings in the Palin news articles had to do with examining Palin’s personal life and framing her as a member of a family. By giving more news space to stories about Palin’s personal life, the writers created a heightened interest in Palin’s life rather than her stances on political issues.

## **Hillary Clinton**

After coding the news articles concerning Hillary Clinton, the two most salient findings were:

- The image that was portrayed of Clinton was conflicted, with some articles presenting her as an accommodating candidate who can relate to her constituents and others showed her as a confrontational candidate who is impersonal and clashes with other candidates.
- Bill Clinton was omnipresent in Hillary Clinton’s campaign coverage. He was part of her campaign and frequently quoted. Sometimes, Hillary was even compared to Bill in her decisions and stances on certain topics.

The first major observation from this research was that the image portrayed of Clinton represented two conflicting representations: the image of an accommodating friendly woman, presented in the “Hillary I Know” campaign, and the image of a confrontational and decisive political figure with traits commonly attributed to masculine candidates. Sullivan and Turner (1996) observed this conflicted representation during Clinton’s time as First Lady, and labeled it the “discourse of confrontation and accommodation.”

Clinton is shown as accommodating by her efforts to reach out to minority constituents and by her attempt to appear “softer.” On Feb. 5, 2008, a *USA Today* article highlighted how Clinton was working on her “warmth” to attract voters to her ticket. Clinton was said to be “chatting” to “a roundtable of working moms” that she “had coffee with.” The author speaks of Clinton’s attempt to “appeal” to these women because she “wants to seem caring, approachable, and in touch” with voters. Another previously published article in the *USA Today* from July 23, 2007, interviewed women who called Clinton a “champion for women” who was a “supportive” and “understand[ing] advocate.” The *Washington Post* humanized Hillary Clinton after her appearance in a *Sopranos* video spoof on June 6, 2007, as it recounted how she had a “sense of humor” and was “adept” in using the mediums familiar to her audiences to accommodate their needs from a candidate. Dan Manatt of PoliticsTV.com is quoted saying that “Hillary Rodham Clinton is very adeptly using the internet to humanize herself.” In an article from *The New York Times* titled “Clinton seeks blend of policy and persona,” the author points out Clinton’s conflicting projections, calling out the “teary-eyed Hillary” and the “I-feel-your-pain Hillary that were her “newest public face.” This article published on Jan. 17 2008, described how she “nodded,” “listened,” and “expressed sympathy” to the audience’s questions in an effort to “play the part” of a concerned and warm candidate.

A contrasting image was presented in another article published by the *New York Times*. In this arti-

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cle, the women of Wellesley College recall Clinton before she was a politician and compare it with the Clinton that has changed as a result of a harsh media and political system. Her peers and classmates said that while she is a “fiery” and “passionate and outspoken” woman, she is also a “guarded and cool politician” who can be “cold” and “calculating.” This article, published on April 14, 2007, says that now she is “savvier” and “more cynical” than she used to be. An article titled “Poll Electability becoming more important to Dems” published by *USA Today* also reinforced the idea that Clinton comes across as confrontational when the author discusses the “controversy over her tone” that concerns Democratic strategists.

Clinton is again shown to be a confrontational figure when another *USA Today* article, published on Sept. 27, 2007, pointed out how she was “criticized” for “closing the door to allies” and “hasn’t learned from mistakes” she made in the past. It also included a quote that referenced her previous discrepancies with Bill Clinton, when she responded “Well, he isn’t standing here right now” in front of a crowd of people. Finally, an article published in the *New York Times* on Nov. 14, 2007, includes a headline calling Clinton a “Democratic Antagonist.” This story discusses how Clinton is a universal scapegoat for the GOP, and includes a quote from Greg Strimple, a GOP pollster, and saying, “The use of Hillary Clinton allows every candidate to overcome the imperfections of their own candidacies.” Pegging her as the antagonist to every Republican candidate, and even to Democratic candidates, frames her as a confrontational candidate that could be the “worst thing for the party.”

The second major finding from the Clinton articles was that Bill Clinton received almost as much coverage as Hillary. Out of the articles analyzed, 46 percent mentioned former President Bill Clinton in some form. When reading the articles as a whole, it seems as if the campaign is about Bill *and* Hillary, not just Hillary Clinton. Bill Clinton is noted as speaking at Hillary Clinton’s rallies or advocating for her in public speeches along the campaign trail. This occurs in an article titled, “Clinton stumps with burgers and Bill” in an article published by the *Washington Post* on Sept. 24, 2007. The writer describes the partnership of Hillary and Bill Clinton along the campaign trail, and how through “role reversal,” Bill Clinton is now acting as a supportive spouse rather than as a campaigning candidate.

A July 14, 2007, article titled “Comeback kid of 92, now half of combo, returns to NH” explores the idea that many of Hillary Clinton’s supporters are just there to get a glimpse at Bill Clinton. One woman is quoted as confessing “that she has probably come more to hear Mr. Clinton than Mrs. Clinton,” while another says “I do believe that with Hillary, you get two for one.” Several months later, another article published by the *New York Times* on May 5, 2008, says that “the Clinton campaign has dispatched...President Clinton to small towns all over the state” in order to make the “final push” for voters in Indiana, a key state for both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. This statement makes Bill Clinton seem like a secret weapon, holed away and waiting to rescue his wife when the time is right.

Sometimes, the entire article is about Bill Clinton and his contributions to Hillary’s campaign, while only mentioning the senator briefly. An example of this occurred in the *Washington Post* on July 3, 2007. The article, titled, “In Iowa, Clinton relies heavily on husband’s star power” discusses how Bill Clinton has been drawing crowds to Hillary Clinton’s rallies, and how she has been using his celebrity to boost the number of voters in her campaign. This article was interesting because it actually mentioned what Bill was wearing before Hillary’s attire was discussed. The author wrote that Bill had on, “a bright yellow shirt” and that she was wearing “a pastel jacket,” painting the picture of a happy, matching couple. The image was pushed further when the writer said that Hillary “followed her husband to the microphone” and “shared the stage with her husband,” and halfway through her speech she “reach[ed] out to her husband” before saying “she would ‘have good help along the way’” when she made it to the White House. The picture painted here is one of a tightly woven marriage where the woman relies on the man, which the general public knows not to be true after the Clinton’s first run in the White House, the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and the further accusations of Bill Clinton’s infidelity.

Hillary Clinton is often compared to Bill Clinton in some of the articles, specifically about her views and opinions of the NAFTA treaty and personal traits. In a *USA Today* article published on Oct. 9, 2007, an article titled “Clinton seeks to reevaluate NAFTA; divides with husband on key issues” talks about how Hillary Clinton “split from husband” and “distanced [herself] from husband’s achievements” while president. Another article published by the *New York Times* on Dec. 9, 2007, compared the couple’s personality traits. The article, titled “Clinton proudly talks of scars while keeping her guard up,” describes Hillary as someone who “picked fights and alienated friends” and was “joyless, humorless, and lacking heart and soul,” and the article quotes people associated with Hillary Clinton. One person is quoted as saying, “Bill genuinely likes being

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with people, Hillary does not.” The article also ends with a picture of Hillary and Bill sitting side by side at the funeral of Mrs. Clinton’s best friend. Bill Clinton is shown tearing up while Hillary is holding strong and clenching her jaw against the tears. The author wrote that “when [Bill] spoke of Mrs. Blair, Mr. Clinton wept...his wife, Diane Blair’s best friend, held steady in the front row.” This presents the image that Hillary’s tough-as-nails demeanor pervades even into her personal life, and perpetuates the descriptors used previously in the article.

Bill Clinton’s presence in the media coverage of Hillary Clinton’s campaign can be attributed to the fact that she was the first lady of the United States, and it would be unreasonable to completely ignore that part of her life. Her time as first lady established her on a national level, and allowed her to gain exposure in more ways than being a senator would have allowed. On the other hand, the percentage of stories occupied by Bill—and the extent to which he is covered—seems very high. The candidate in this race is Hillary Clinton, not Bill Clinton, who already had his time in the White House. Other candidates’ spouses—Michelle Obama, a prominent lawyer; Todd Palin, a champion snowmobile racer; and Cindy McCain, chair of Hensley & Co.—were featured prominently in the news during certain times in the campaign, but not as consistently as Bill Clinton.

## IV. Discussion

Media coverage of women in politics has evolved over the last half century, but the biases and stereotypes seen in both public relations materials and print journalism articles leads to the conclusion that women are still represented differently when it comes to national political campaigns. Women struggle to be seen as competent enough to be a viable candidate for any major public office, which was evident in the 2008 presidential election.

After examining the findings from the coding of the news articles and the press releases, several overarching themes presented themselves. By combining the different qualitative results and interview responses from public relations professionals, the following four themes classifying the images of candidates can be identified, and their effect on the campaigns of the women can be inferred:

### ***Extreme Perceptions***

Both Palin and Clinton were the subject of extreme perceptions, a category previously mentioned, which was established by the group the *Catalyst* in 2007 as a result of a research study. The *Catalyst*, a leading nonprofit organization that specializes in expanding opportunities for women in the workplace, found that the pigeonholing of women into extreme roles has been noted in both corporate offices and in the political sphere. When women act in accordance with traditional gender roles, they are seen as too “soft”, yet when they conform to the masculine traits favored in political office, they are seen as too “tough” (Double Bind Dilemmas for Women, 2007, pp. 60-61). The *Catalyst*’s “too soft” category occurs when women act in ways consistent with traditionally feminine stereotypes and are deemed incompetent. The “too hard” category occurs when women do not take traditionally feminine stereotypes and are deemed “unfeminine” and therefore “too tough” (Catalyst, 2007). Clinton and Palin both suffered from extreme classifications, with Clinton often falling on the “too tough” end of the spectrum and Palin spending the beginning of her campaign on the “too soft” end and shifting towards the “too tough” end towards the election.

At the beginning of Palin’s campaign, she found herself classified in the “too soft” end of the spectrum after her handlers cut off media access to “protect” her. Palin also was framed as the subject of “attacks” by the Democratic Party and placed into the role of a victim to villainize Obama and the Democratic campaign. The articles analyzed framed Sarah Palin as victimized by both the media and by the Obama campaign.

Palin’s sequestration, followed by much media speculation, actually hurt her campaign because of the lack of outgoing information on her platforms and political stances. Palin now says that she regrets not speaking out against her handlers and talking to the media anyway, but because of her instructions, she kept quiet (Palin, 2009).

This emotional appeal portraying Palin as a victim paved the way for the other side of Palin; the side presented as a gung-ho, “moose-shooting” maverick attack dog that would clean-up Washington’s political. Palin won over many voters by her outward love of her family and vow to defend them, and by identifying herself as a “Washington outsider.” After she established a relationship with her voting base, she could pass

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into the territory known so well by Clinton: acting as a confrontational candidate without alienating voters. The victimized and outcast Sarah Palin from the early campaign presented in both print journalism and by the McCain-Palin press team grew to a “killer” candidate, and no one seemed to be bothered. By using the two extremes of Palin in this order, the campaign allowed the actions and words from Palin to be excusable, almost as a way to get revenge or to “fight back” for the injustice done against her and her family.

Still, try as she might, Palin could not shake the initial brand of being “too soft.” She did aim to portray herself as hardened and tough but the image did not stick: she likened herself to a “pit bull with lipstick” in her famous vice presidential nomination speech, and often referred to herself as a “mother bear.” However, even after she stood her ground in the vice presidential debate with Sen. Joe Biden, her looks, which brought about the slogan, “Coldest state, hottest governor” seemed to impede on her portrayal as a toughened politician. This hurt her chances at being taken seriously on a national political stage.

Clinton, on the other hand, was criticized during her time in the White House as well as on the campaign trail for being too hard, harsh, or impersonal (Hsu, 2009). By the time the 2008 election rolled around, Clinton had already established herself as a non-traditional female because of her often criticized demeanor during her time as First Lady. She had already established herself as unconventional, unemotional, and even cold in the eyes of American voters, which was hard to overcome. Through her husband’s two terms and the tumultuous relationship she shared with him, Hillary Clinton drew much attention for her lack of public emotion. This persona continued and followed her to the campaign trail, where she was criticized for her hardened demeanor by opponents, the media, and members of her own party.

The prime example of media criticism during Clinton’s campaign was at her friend Diane Blair’s funeral, when she did not cry but her husband did (Liebovich, Clinton proudly talks of scars while keeping her guard up, 2007). Clinton’s lack of tears became the topic of debate instead of political issues like healthcare or foreign policy. In a completely different case, Clinton did shed tears—and was criticized for it. After an audience question at the New Hampshire primary caused her to break down in tears, the media flocked to analyze her show of emotion, saying she was insincere or that it was staged (Lawrence J. , Candidates make final push before primary: Clinton loses lead in nat’l Gallup Poll, 2008). Some critics even said that her tears meant she was not qualified to lead the country, even though in months prior President Bush had cried on television during a Medal of Honor presentation (Benac, 2007).

These two completely opposite events show that no matter what Clinton did, she could not escape the criticism that she was never “just right” for the office of president. Juxtaposed together, these incidents are a perfect example of the way that women struggle for acceptance and the validity that they can be legitimate candidates for offices on a national level.

Women candidates are stuck in a vicious cycle in a similar vein as the fairy tale, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*; these candidates have been labeled too hot and too cold, but we are still waiting to find when they will be labeled “just right.”

## **Family**

In the news articles about Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton, family was very prominently featured. The number of articles and stories about the families of the women reflects the framing of the candidates by both print articles and public relations materials as mothers and caretakers that will ensure the wellbeing of the country.

Often, the press gets blamed for focusing too much on the candidate’s family members. In both her book, *Going Rogue*, and in interviews after her campaign, Sarah Palin frequently criticized the media for focusing on her family, from breaking the news of Bristol’s pregnancy to the “Troopergate” scandal. Palin, a self-proclaimed “mother bear,” said that she begged the media to leave her family alone and they did not acquiesce, yet when Barack Obama asked the media to leave his children be, the media listened (Palin, 2009).

In Clinton’s campaign, print news articles featured Bill prominently, and went as far as to base whole articles around his role in Clinton’s campaign. It is important to acknowledge the fact that he was previously the President of the United States, and therefore a newsworthy public figure, so some media coverage was expected. Constantly comparing the Clintons, however, was not. It is possible that the journalists writing the stories used Bill Clinton as an easy way to establish the story or to set the political scene. Bill Clinton offered a newsworthy name in conjunction with Hillary Clinton, so journalists may have seen this as an opportunity to attract more readers to their stories.

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Other candidate's families were not featured as prominently as Clinton and Palin's. Cindy McCain seldom made news articles, and McCain's children or other family were hardly ever involved in press coverage. Obama asked the press to leave his children out of the media spotlight, and his request was relatively respected. The exception to this trend was Michelle Obama, who was featured more often than most of the other candidate's family members. Michelle Obama was talked about because of her accomplishments as a black woman in a professional field, her role as a successful working woman and mother, and because of her fashion choices. These frames support the observations of this research. Michelle Obama was seen as a novelty because few black women have been prominently featured on the national political stage. Her skills as a mother were also called into the spotlight, and media tended to speculate how she would raise her two daughters, Malia and Sasha, in the White House. The media also drew much attention to her impressive sense of style, comparing her to a modern day Jacquelyn Kennedy. Her fashion choices, often full of color and from publicly accessible stores like *White House*, *Black Market*, were a stark contrast to the expensive navy suits worn on the campaign trail by both Palin and Clinton. Michelle Obama was neatly boxed into the same frames that the female candidates in the race were framed in; as a motherly figure, as a figure who represented the average or disadvantaged American family, and as a novelty representation of how the United States has succeeded in leveling the playing field for all citizens.

### ***Mother or Candidate: Pick One.***

In the same mindset that frames female candidates as caretakers and family figures, they are criticized more than male candidates for the toll taken on their family life. This was especially seen in the 2008 election with Palin's campaign. News stories repeatedly mentioned Palin's motherhood as a major part of her candidacy, especially since she had one son serving in Iraq, one pregnant teenage daughter, and one special needs child. While many mothers and women across the country rejoiced that "one of us" was on the road to the White House, speculation grew about the viability of a candidate with so many young children. Palin, the mother of five, was routinely questioned on her ability to raise a family with a special needs child—her ability to be a "good" mom—and her ability to hold and perform well in the office of Vice President at the same time. Palin, who had successfully been a mayor and Governor of the State of Alaska, drew much fire for exposing her children to such a spotlight as the national political stage, and was doubted for her competency to raise a family while Vice President.

This election spared Clinton some of the turmoil she suffered during her time as First Lady (Turner, 1996). During her time as First Lady, Clinton was criticized for breaking the "normal" role of a First Lady by refusing to be a "sweet, quiet wife behind her husband" and instead being "professional, tough, and independent" (Hsu, 2009). Gleason notes, Clinton was "demonized from the beginning...if people think Sarah Palin was demonized [in the media], Clinton has been from the early days.

Different media outlets described her as "ambitious, aggressive, and hardheaded...the yuppie wife from hell," and the New York Times wrote that she "made her husband seem like a wimp" (Hsu, 2009).

This election, journalists seemed to be more respectful of Clinton than they were during her time as First Lady. The elite newspapers did not use such aggressive and scathing terminology when describing Clinton as a candidate. Bracey hypothesized that the previously established relationship between Clinton and the media was the cause. He says, "In 1990, Hillary Clinton gave press conference where she sat down and answered every question from bloodthirsty reporters. At the end of it, people still felt negatively about her [choices in her] personal life, but a lot of people had respect for her."

Clinton's willingness to cooperate with the media established a relationship that may have affected her media coverage. While the portrayal of Clinton was far from gentle, her give and take relationship with the media, especially compared to Palin's relationship, generally created a more respectful news environment than the one that existed during her time as first lady.

In general, questions surrounding child rearing while being a national political figure seemed to point at the women involved in the 2008 election. According to most media speculation, women cannot hold positions of power while being "good" mothers; one must be one or the other.

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## **V. Conclusion**

While coverage of female candidates has evolved to be less biased in terms of amount of coverage and story type, there are still discrepancies in the themes of both the press releases and print articles and the polarization of women running for office. Women are still characterized in both public relations materials and in print articles by platforms for “feminine” causes and in the polarization of female candidates by framing them as too “hard” or too “soft.” It is unclear if this is intentional, or if the stereotypical frames inherent in human behavior cause the separation and polarization of male and female to pervade all aspects of life.

Because of the gendered office of president and vice president, many scholars note women are still trapped in the double bind that causes them to be a competent candidate or a good mother, overly outgoing or bitchy, an accomplished leader or not well liked, with no option in between. The campaigns of both Palin and Clinton are indicative of the trend that women cannot run as “normal” candidates as they are represented as extreme and larger-than-life by the media. It is only by reshaping the framing and coverage of national political offices that we can realistically expect women running for office to have an equal chance at representation, portrayal, and perhaps election. The media play an important role in this reshaping because of their power to frame candidates, issues, and political offices. If public relations departments of campaigns as well as popular media outlets refuse to propagate candidates’ gender stereotypes, the “glass ceiling” holding minorities of all genders and races from political office will finally break, leading to a more democratic and representative government.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my thesis mentor, Dr. Frances Ward-Johnson, for mentoring me through the research process. I would also like to thank Elon’s communications school for everything I have learned over the past 4 years, the Honors Fellows program for its support and for promoting undergraduate research projects, and to all of my professors who never fail to amaze me with their dedication and commitment to their students.

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