

❖ **Falk, Erica. *Women for President: Media Bias in Nine Campaigns, Second Edition*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2010 (pp. 206) ISBN 978-0-252-07691-6**

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With the elevation in 2010 of Australia's first female Prime Minister, the currency of debate around representations of women in media coverage of Federal politics is very quickly apparent. We only have to look at the controversy surrounding Julia Gillard's earlobes or recommendations that she employ a stylist to boost the public's perception of her competence for examples of the type and focus of reportage specific to Gillard's role in office, as a woman. Erica Falk's study brings to the fore precisely these discordant and, it would seem, anachronistic elements of media reportage of women's attempts to gain highest political office in the United States.

Comparing print media coverage of a defensible selection of nine female presidential candidates to that of their closest male adversary, from the first woman to campaign in 1872 through to Hillary Rodham Clinton's attempt to hold the lead in the primaries against Barack Obama in 2008, Falk undertakes detailed content analysis to demonstrate a sustained gender bias in campaign press coverage over a period of 130 years. From gender stereotyping to more in-depth discussion of a variety of prejudices contained in press content, Falk's study raises important questions about the role of gender in access to public office and why so little has changed in the media reception of female presidential candidates over the intervening period of feminist advocacy and apparent shifts in women's roles and rights. Indeed, in questioning the more general presumption that democratic processes provide equal access to positions of power, Falk demonstrates a politics of difference at work in these media accounts which marks women's attempts at election to highest federal office as specifically gendered and at odds with the normative framing of this level of leadership.

More chilling than the content of the reportage is its absence, and the impact that this may have on women's political participation. For Falk, the press plays a crucial role in both the success of a campaign as well as its ability to constrain women's decisions to enter this level of politics, where lessened media attention and the lack of role-modeling benefits could inhibit women's self-selection to the principal role in government. The legitimating role of media, and in particular the press (given its national reach), is established in Chapter One where the author draws on social constructionist accounts, linguistic explanations, and labeling theory, among others, to substantiate her claim that collectively mediated experiences help to create shared interpretative frameworks and common conceptions, which naturally have a direct

impact upon the viability of a politician's election to federal office.

The extent of this impact is explored in further depth in Chapter Two, where Falk argues that particular ideologies underscore media coverage with the effect of rendering women unnatural and out of place in public and political life. Here, Falk draws a link between some well-worn assumptions around women's domestic roles and their framing of female candidacy, and finds a series of common representations of women candidates that continue to naturalise their domestic role and the qualities most often associated with it. Notably, women candidates are frequently portrayed as 'firsts', concealing their political history and introducing the idea of their novelty in the presidential race. An apparent disjuncture between femininity and competence is frequently highlighted and, most prevalent, is the argument that women are not viable candidates for highest office *qua* woman, often with no insight offered as to why this should be the case.

A striking illustration of the resistant and co-optive nature of these traditional perceptions of women's social position is found in Falk's recount of the increased conservatism accompanying Chase Smith's 1964 campaign, which coincided with the rise of second wave feminism when women's roles and assumptions around their proper (domestic) place were undergoing rigorous scrutiny (33). Falk's account suggests that it is precisely where the conflict surrounding women's roles is most prominent that the question of their appropriateness in the public sphere comes to the fore, with the press reasserting women's unsuitability for public office (35) in all campaigns studied.

The gendered nature of the public/private binary established in Chapter Two sets the scene for the remaining chapters which seek to understand: the extent to which the press reinforces or challenges gender stereotypes (Chapter Three); reporting on the appearance of candidates, including gender marking and the nature and impact of physical descriptions (Chapter Four); the amount of press coverage received by women in comparison to their male counterparts (Chapter Five); the nature of this coverage, including biographical content versus issue-based content (Chapter Six); and an inquiry into the implicit bias in polling information and the profile of typical supporters of women presidential candidates (Chapter Seven).

In a detailed and systematic fashion, Falk works through press content to present some very interesting and instructive findings. Traditional assumptions obtain as women candidates receive more emotional descriptions than men (56), they are more likely to be described in relation to their families (60), and referred to by their marital status rather than their professional title, or referred to by first name (62-63). In addition to this, women candidates are more often described in terms of their appearance, and in particular their attire, potentially reinforcing the view that women are 'objects whereas men are actors' (96). The bias continues as we learn that overall women candidates receive less newspaper space than men (101), and the space they do command is less focused on substantive issues and more focused on biographical information about their character, personality, and experience (122).

Coverage of Hillary Clinton's campaign, with additional content from key digital media, does not deviate significantly from the previous campaigns studied. On the other hand, trends in coverage of Clinton's candidature reinforce Falk's conclusion that the news is not all bad, and the idea that women are capable and viable candidates is advanced more often nowadays (47 and 175) in spite of continuing prejudices within reportage. The key question to which Falk alludes is whether equality of coverage might represent a stronger move towards gender equity in top level politics, and whether this may detract from the significant challenges faced by women to achieve this role.

Falk's research findings are organized into sub-headings that easily identify common elements of press coverage. The book remains well paced and engaging as it moves through the

findings, and the level of detail in content analysis readily conveys many nuances in coverage. In this critical mode, there is no wholesale dismissal of media reportage as erroneously biased, nor simply an 'instrument of the status quo' (186). Instead, the author provides a more balanced account that identifies where and how biases occur across campaigns, marking out their differences, and indicating where coverage departs from its usual framing of women.

However, the force of Falk's insights is diffused to an extent by what could be described as speculative analysis that follows from her in-depth evaluation of the content itself. Some easy correlations are made which would benefit from a more robust or supported analysis. The repeated suggestion that existing media representations of women candidates may result in women being less likely to run for election is not developed upon, nor followed up with any substantiating data. Falk also risks simplifying the terms of her argument, at times to a point where she may inadvertently recuperate the meanings and categories that she carefully spells out as incompatible with an assessment of women's capacity to fulfill presidential office. In one example she assumes a relationship between emotion and irrationality (56) when this stereotyping itself could be critically interrogated. In a related example Falk concedes that patterns of family mentions are complex, but offers little analysis beyond descriptive quantification of these mentions. Significantly, she does not extrapolate upon the power dynamics that these references might imply, such as the suggestion contained in references to a female candidate as a wife (61), which emphasise her relationship with her husband over that of her public role.

The notion of the political largely constitutes elective politics in this study, and this can tend to overlook some of the more subtle political processes that may help shape the issues in focus here. For example, the question of how women consume media receives little complex analysis. From the claim that they may be influenced by media coverage which reminds them that their primary duties lie in the domestic sphere (6) to the notion that women may be deterred from running for public office because of the scrutiny it affords their appearance (84), the idea that women contest and negotiate with media representations is not fully considered. In effect, there is a tendency here to view women as comprising a more homogenous group influenced by the coercive force of the media, which is given a pronounced agency as a primary factor in women's decision to self-select for presidential candidature as much as the impact it is able to have on the public's receptiveness to women presidential candidates. As a result, some interesting questions are left aside in Falk's analysis. For example why women journalists would participate in propagating these representations of women candidates rather than altering or contesting them, or why ambivalence or opposition to female candidacy occurs among women (44) more generally. In an intellectual climate where the politics of representation has been drawn through some nuanced and sophisticated arguments for the constraining and productive nature of discourse and textual production, some important and informative insights remain under-explored in Falk's conceptual framing of her study as well as in her analysis.

In spite of these weaknesses, Falk's study is both timely and instructive. Its broad appeal lies in the author's ability to make a series of important considerations around the role of gender in admittance to public office easily accessible to a general audience. Equally, this text provides plenty of examples for lively discussion in a range of disciplines, offering students a starting point for debates around gender representation in its political and mediated forms. The significance of Falk's findings, along with the scope of literature she draws upon, is of some use for those who are engaged in similar research. Finally, Falk's recommendations for women candidates and their campaign runners offered at the text's conclusion may provide helpful strategies for negotiating media coverage, which could in turn address the very exclusions and biases she identifies as impediments to female representation in highest office.

About the Reviewer

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