Press Effects, Public Opinion, and Gender: 
Coverage of Sarah Palin’s Vice Presidential Campaign

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Abstract

The press had great potential to influence perceptions of Sarah Palin during the 2008 campaign, given her relative obscurity when picked to be the Republican vice presidential nominee. Prior literature on press treatment of women running for national office suggests that Palin was likely to receive coverage that disadvantaged her due to her gender. We scrutinize press coverage of Palin’s campaign for evidence that she was treated differently and that these differences affected public opinion. Our sample of over 2,500 individual newspaper articles published during the campaign is paired with the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey. We demonstrate that Palin’s coverage differed in significant ways from that of her male counterpart. Her gender, appearance, and family status were disproportionately mentioned in her coverage, and such mentions tended to dampen public opinion about her. In addition, the tone of Palin’s coverage was markedly negative, increasingly so over time, and was significantly related to reader opinion about her. While Palin was a unique candidate for national-level office, these findings should give pause to those concerned with equitable press treatment of women on the campaign trail.

Keywords

media effects, presidential campaigns, gender, Sarah Palin, public opinion
From early in her 2008 campaign for Vice President of the United States, Sarah Palin accused the news media of bias against her. At the Republican National Convention, Palin proclaimed, “I’ve learned quickly… that if you’re not a member in good standing of the Washington elite, then some in the media consider a candidate unqualified for that reason alone.” Palin’s relationship with the media was certainly tumultuous. She routinely complained to delighted crowds who appeared to share her view that the “liberal” media wanted to see her fail.

Palin was rightly concerned about her press coverage, although for different reasons than she advanced. First, women running for national office typically receive “gendered” coverage detrimental to their campaigns. Women running for president consistently receive less press coverage than men, and it tends to be negative (Falk 2008; Heldman et al. 2005; see also Kahn 1994a, 1994b; Kahn and Goldenberg 1991). It also focuses on their appearance and perceived long-shot odds at the expense of their positions (Falk 2008; Heldman et al. 2005; Smooth 2006). While Hillary Clinton’s 2008 coverage broke some of these trends (Lawrence and Rose 2010; Miller, et al. 2010), a little known governor from Alaska might not be treated similarly.

Second, press influence over voter opinion is well documented (Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Kiousis 2005; Patterson 1993), and effects can be dramatic when women run. Experimental studies demonstrate that typical “women’s coverage” negatively influences voter sentiment toward any candidate, whether male or female (Kahn 1992, 1994a, 1996; see also Dayhoff 1983). Experiments specific to Palin further suggest that objectification of the governor – as might be found in her press coverage – depressed assessments of her competence (Heflick and Goldenberg 2009, 2011). Such effects in the real world might be especially pronounced since Palin was largely unknown, was only the second woman on a major party presidential
ticket, and offered a unique gender performance on the campaign trail. The press was likely to both cover Palin extensively and influence public opinion about her.

We scrutinize coverage of Palin’s campaign in 17 leading U.S. newspapers. In keeping with prior studies, we compare Palin’s coverage to her male counterpart’s for evidence that her coverage followed typical “gendered” patterns. The evidence we find is mixed. Palin garnered voluminous coverage, but it was markedly negative. Mentions of her gender, appearance, and family status were disproportionate, but each was associated with positive, rather than negative, coverage. We also examine the temporal dynamics of Palin’s coverage and find that its tone soured over time. Finally, we demonstrate that Palin’s press coverage significantly influenced public opinion, and that mentions of her gender and appearance were detrimental.

We thus offer evidence from the real world of presidential politics, rather than the laboratory, that the differential treatment of Palin adversely affected voter opinion. While Palin’s candidacy and campaign were unique, her press coverage should give pause to those concerned with the equitable treatment of women seeking elective office.

A History of Gendered Coverage

Scholars concerned about women’s press coverage have focused on women running for president and women running for lower-level offices. Both types of studies largely assess newspaper coverage, although some work at the presidential level also examines coverage in other venues.¹

Historically, women running for president have suffered from a lack of coverage. Falk (2008) documents persistent bias in coverage afforded women running for president across three centuries. Women from Belva Lockwood to Patricia Schroeder fought for the little coverage they received. As recently as 2000, Elizabeth Dole received less coverage than men trailing her in the
polls (Heldman et al. 2005). Such inequities appeared to dissipate in 2008 for Hillary Clinton. She received as much or more coverage than her male counterparts (Lawrence and Rose 2010; Miller et. al 2010; Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007).

Yet substance matters as much as quantity and presidential-level studies reveal that women suffer in terms of content. Since 1872 women presidential candidates have been consistently portrayed as unviable; press accounts have emphasized their appearance and gender while virtually ignoring their platforms (Falk 2008). Such coverage objectifies and trivializes women, treating them as novelties rather than legitimate candidates (Braden 1996; Falk 2008; Woodall and Fridkin 2007). Dole’s coverage emphasized her appearance, personal story, and gender (Aday and Devitt 2001; Heldman et al. 2005). Carol Moseley Braun was equated with Al Sharpton, who had never held elective office (Smooth 2006). While Clinton’s issue-oriented coverage was commensurate with her male counterparts, disproportionate mentions of her gender were significantly associated with the open questioning of her electability (Miller et al. 2010).

Negative coverage has also bedeviled women running for president, with Dole and Clinton as two recent examples (Heldman et al. 2005; Lawrence and Rose 2010; Miller et al. 2010).

Women running for lower-level offices have endured similar disparities in coverage amount and content – though each may be on the wane. Early studies of campaigns for U.S. House of Representatives, Senate and governor found that women received significantly less coverage than men (Kahn 1992, 1994b, 1996; Kahn and Goldenberg 1991). More recent work suggests that such disparities may be coming into alignment. Smith (1997) found smaller differences in coverage volume in 1994 than prior studies utilizing earlier data. Bystrom et al. (2004) found that women running for U.S. Senate and governor garnered less coverage than men in 1998, but more in 2000.
In terms of substance, coverage of women running for sub-presidential offices tends to disproportionately mention their appearance, personality, and family status (Braden 1996; Kahn 1996). Their coverage has also been disproportionately negative (Kahn 1994a, 1994b; Kahn and Goldenberg 1991). As with volume, however, there are some promising recent trends in coverage content. Press focus on the gender, marital and parental status of women candidates seems to be on the wane (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; although see Bystrom et al. 2004). Disproportionate negativity in women’s coverage has also largely disappeared at the sub-presidential level (Banwart et al. 2003; Bystrom et al. 2004; Kittilson and Fridkin 2008).

This prior work illuminates the hurdles women face when seeking press coverage of their campaigns. At the sub-presidential level some of these hurdles seem to be disappearing. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that trends toward equanimity in coverage of races for governor, for instance, would smoothly translate to coverage of Palin. She was hand-picked by John McCain – landing on the presidential ticket without first campaigning in the primaries and caucuses. More importantly, Palin’s was a unique story (first-term governor, mother of five with a special-needs infant) delivered in a way that complicated the feminine and masculine.

Palin rejected the proverbial pantsuit of women candidates, styled her hair in a feminine fashion, talked openly about her children, and showcased them at the convention (McGinley 2009). Gibson and Heyse’s explication of her convention speech reveals numerous markers of a maternal persona including a personal tone, incorporation of anecdotes, and a number of folksy colloquialisms. Yet Palin undermined this feminine / maternal style by lauding McCain as a masculine warrior while emasculating Obama for being a mere community organizer (2010).

Palin continued to present a complicated gender performance post-convention. She wore high heels, tailored jackets and short skirts to campaign events, yet the campaign circulated
images of Palin hunting and shouldering firearms. These brought to mind a horseback-riding Ronald Reagan or a wood-chopping George W. Bush (Beail and Longworth 2013). Even the campaign’s portrayal of Palin as a “hockey mom” wed the feminine / maternal with stereotypically masculine traits like toughness and aggressiveness (Beail and Longworth 2013). Palin’s “pit bulls with lipstick” joke further fused the masculine and feminine. Rather than carefully negotiate the “double bind” women face – who risk appearing either too feminine or too masculine (Jamieson 1995) – Palin seemed to reject the bind altogether. She openly touted hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity.

As anyone who followed the 2008 campaign knows, Palin received voluminous coverage. Understandable, since she held each marker Ulbig (2010) associates with heightened press coverage of vice presidential nominees: newness to the national scene, a distinctive characteristic, a unique shortcoming, and scandal.2 The content of Palin’s coverage is somewhat more difficult to succinctly summarize. We thus test several hypotheses that spring from the literature on women’s presidential and sub-presidential campaigns. In keeping with this literature, we compare Palin’s coverage to that of her male counterpart, Joe Biden.

_Hypothesis 1: Palin’s coverage was more negative than Biden’s._

_Hypothesis 2: Palin’s coverage was more likely than Biden’s to emphasize gender._

_Hypothesis 3: Palin’s coverage was more likely than Biden’s to emphasize appearance._

_Hypothesis 4: Palin’s coverage was more likely than Biden’s to emphasize family status._

**The Potential for Press Influence**

Not only do we expect Palin’s coverage to differ in predictable ways from Biden’s, we also expect it to be influential. Media coverage across a variety of outlets influences voter perceptions of candidates through the process of framing. Framing “involves selecting a few
aspects of a perceived reality and connecting them together in a narrative that promotes a particular interpretation” (Entman 2010: 391). Framing can affect how individuals view issues and political actors, and can shape public opinion about candidates during an election (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Studies across presidential campaigns suggest that how candidates are framed in the press influences public opinion about them (Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Johnston et al. 2004).

The media’s role in framing candidate evaluations is likely to increase in low information contexts. Voters tend to rely on information in media accounts when little is known about a candidate (Mutz 1998). Coverage of a little-known candidate for national office can thus have pronounced effects (Sears and Kosterman 1994; see also Ulbig 2010). McCain’s pick of Palin triggered this sort of low-information scenario. In a Gallup poll conducted the day after Palin’s selection, a majority of Americans did not know enough about her to offer an opinion (Newport 2008). Yet the public was eager to learn about Palin. Her speech at the GOP Convention drew 37.2 million viewers (U.S. News and World Report 2008) and 69.9 million watched her debate Biden, making theirs the “most widely viewed vice presidential debate in history” (Benoit and Henson 2009, 48).

The degree to which a candidate is framed positively versus negatively has further potential to influence voter evaluations (Entman 1989; Johnston, et al. 2004; Shaw 1999). As Entman (2010: 392) argues, “One-sided framing emphasizes some elements and suppresses others in ways that encourage recipients to give attention and weight to evaluative attributes….” When negative information about a candidate accumulates, one-sided negative framing becomes more likely. Such negative “slant” is especially likely to influence public opinion when a consensus develops within the media (Entman 2010; see also Chong and Druckman 2007).
Palin’s coverage appears to have played out in this fashion. It soured over time, as we show below.

The McCain campaign did not help matters. Its initial strategy of shielding Palin from the media “fueled press speculation about her competence” (Kenski et al. 2010). Subsequent interviews with ABC’s Charles Gibson and CBS’s Katie Couric further stoked suspicions, given her uneven and rambling performances (Kenski et al. 2010). A negative frame focusing on Palin's perceived incompetence gained momentum. This focus on Palin’s alleged incompetence likely fed gender-based stereotypes — that women are less competent on “presidential” issues like defense and foreign policy, and less strong and decisive than men (e.g. Lawless 2004; Sapiro 1981-82; Woodall and Fridkin 2007).

In part because gender was already salient in the 2008 campaign, conditions were ripe for gender stereotyping. The press had a long history of disproportionately mentioning the gender, appearance, and family status of women candidates. Cueing voters to think about Palin as an attractive woman, mother, and wife were likely to dampen opinion about her. The presidency, after all, is an “office predicated on masculinity” (Duerst-Lahti 2008: 733). Voters tend to associate stereotypically masculine traits like toughness and aggressiveness with the presidency — not stereotypically feminine traits like warmth and compassion (Heldman 2007; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Lawless 2004). The fact that Palin combined large doses of each blurs expectations about how such gendered coverage might influence public opinion. As Entman puts it, “Palin… hearkened to the cultural archetype of the plucky, self-reliant pioneer woman who could raise a passel of kids—and handle a rifle to protect them…” (2010: 398). She was overtly feminine and overtly masculine. We nevertheless anticipate that press emphasis on Palin’s
gender, appearance and family status depressed public opinion about her, in keeping with the prior literature (see Braden 1996; Falk 2008; Woodall and Fridkin 2007).

In sum, press coverage of candidates may prime particular frames of reference and stereotypes among voters that can influence their attitudes. Such effects were likely pronounced for Palin. We thus hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 5:** The tone of Palin’s coverage had a direct influence on reader opinion.

**Hypothesis 6:** Press mentions of Palin’s gender, appearance, and family status were inversely related to reader opinion about her.

**Methodology**

In order to test each hypothesis, we content-coded articles and editorials covering the 2008 presidential campaign from the top-circulating newspapers in each of 13 battleground states. States were chosen based on pre-election polling and/or closeness of recent presidential elections. Four leading newspapers of record were also included, for a total of 17 newspapers (see Appendix A).

We examine newspapers, rather than a cross-section of media outlets, in part due to their availability and ease of comparisons across outlets. Newspapers also lend themselves readily to content analysis. Most importantly, we merged our press coverage data with the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) to estimate press effects, and all 17 newspapers in our sample were among those reported as sources of campaign information by NAES respondents.

Focusing on newspapers limits our analysis somewhat, given the growing importance of the Internet, blogs, and cable television in inter-media agenda-setting (e.g., Meraz 2011). Notwithstanding these concerns, in 2008 newspapers were a significant part of the media landscape with a sizable audience compared to other news outlets, suggesting their importance even in a period of declining circulation. Research further demonstrates that the slant of
newspaper coverage can affect voter decisions and favorability toward U.S. Senate candidates (Druckman and Parkin 2005; Kahn and Kenney 2002) and president (e.g., Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Johnston, et al. 2004). Moreover, Druckman (2005) suggests that newspaper coverage plays a greater role in informing the electorate than television news.

The data collection window spanned from September 1, 2008 (the first weekday after Palin was placed on the GOP ticket) through November 4, 2008 (Election Day). Articles and editorials had to be at least five sentences long and address the presidential race. To save on subscription costs and minimize coder burden, only weekday coverage was analyzed. All front page articles were selected for the sample (n=753). The remaining 1,839 articles and editorials were selected at random, bringing the total sample to 2,592. This represents 56 percent of the total population of articles published that met the selection criteria in these 17 newspapers. For each paper, the proportion of articles in the sample mirrors the proportion of articles in the population.

Content coding was conducted by the authors, who were joined by a team of graduate and undergraduate coders. Specific information was coded about each candidate mentioned in each article: whether or not they were mentioned in the headline; its tone toward them (negative / neutral / positive); how many sentences were devoted to them; and whether their gender, clothing / appearance, parental and marital status were mentioned. The article’s overall tone toward each candidate (negative / neutral / positive) was also assessed. Tests of inter-coder reliability suggest it was moderate to high.

The NAES (2008 Phone Edition) is merged with our coverage data to determine whether press coverage influenced reader opinion about Palin. The NAES utilized random digit dialing and a national, rolling cross-section design. A total of 57,967 U.S. adult residents were
interviewed daily between December 17, 2007 and November 3, 2008. The response rate was 19 percent.\textsuperscript{12} We include only those 1,931 respondents interviewed on or after September 1 who reported reading one of the 17 sampled newspapers listed in Appendix A.\textsuperscript{13}

We model reader favorability toward Palin and assessments of her readiness to be president. Both are measured from 0 to 10; higher scores indicate greater favorability / readiness.\textsuperscript{14} Descriptive statistics for each appear in Appendix B.

**Coverage Amount, Tone, and Visibility**

Table 1 compares the volume and tone of Palin’s coverage to Biden’s. Palin’s coverage was clearly more extensive than Biden’s, both in terms of headline and article mentions. Reader opinions are unlikely to be influenced if coverage is minimal, so Palin’s coverage satisfied a condition necessary for press effects. On balance Palin’s coverage was also more negative than Biden’s. Forty-three percent of headlines mentioning Palin were negative, compared with 36 percent of Biden’s. Similarly, 35 percent of articles mentioning Palin reflected negatively on her, versus 15 percent of Biden’s.

**TABLE 1 HERE**

The tone of a candidate’s coverage matters insofar as it is visible to readers. By this standard, Biden’s positive coverage likely mattered little, while Palin’s negative coverage mattered a lot. Figure 1 displays positive and negative visibility indexes for each candidate. Each index is the candidate’s number of positive / negative headlines divided by the total number of headlines. We focus on headlines because they are visible to even casual readers. In theory, scores can range from 0 (no positive / negative headlines for that candidate) to 1 (uniformly positive / negative headlines in every headline in the sample).

**FIGURE 1 HERE**
While Palin’s press exposure was more visibly negative than Biden’s, it was also more visibly positive. Her proportion of positive headlines (28 percent) was slightly smaller than his (29 percent), but there were far more of them, so Palin’s positive visibility outstripped Biden’s. On balance, however, Table 1 and Figure 1 make clear that the press presented a relatively visible, negative portrait of Palin.

While Hypothesis 1 is supported, the question arises whether Palin’s negative coverage simply reflected the struggling state of the GOP ticket and/or negativity toward McCain. To check the first possibility we examined the relationship between coverage tone and horserace mentions. While McCain’s headline and article tone were strongly correlated with simultaneous mentions of the Republican ticket’s status in the polls, this was not true for Palin. Her negative coverage was not easily explained by the horserace. To check the second possibility we compared the tone of Palin’s coverage to McCain’s, limiting the analysis to articles primarily about each (see Table 2). In terms of both headline and overall article tone, articles primarily about McCain tended to reflect much less negatively on him than was true for Palin. The notion that Palin’s negative coverage reflected McCain’s is not supported.

The Temporal Dynamics of Tone

Coverage tone is not static; it responds to events on the campaign trail. Figure 2 displays Palin’s article tone differential by week and clearly suggests some periodicity. Palin’s coverage skewed positive during the convention stage before trending neutral. It took a severe negative turn following Palin’s poor performance in a network television interview with Couric and a vice presidential debate in which she merely exceeded “basement-level expectations” (Kenski et al. 2010: 157).
FIGURE 2 HERE

The data displayed in Figure 2 resembles that in Entman’s analysis of network evening news (2010). According to Entman, news reports moved from focusing on Palin’s novelty and contributions to the GOP ticket to emphasizing her inexperience and lack of skill in the aftermath of shaky televised interviews with Gibson and Couric. Kenski et al. analyze NAES survey data and document a corresponding slide in voter assessments of Palin (Kenski et al. 2010). Yet neither Entman nor Kenski et al. test the empirical relationship between coverage of Palin and public opinion. After examining specific, gendered aspects of Palin’s coverage, we do just that.

A Gendered Portrayal

Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4 posit disproportionate press attention to Palin’s gender, appearance, and family status. Each hypothesis is supported. Palin’s gender was mentioned 6 times more often than Biden’s (20.9 versus 3.4 percent). Her clothing / appearance and parental status were mentioned 4 times as often (6.7 versus 1.7 percent and 18.1 versus 4.6 percent, respectively). The disparity was smallest, but still statistically significant, for mentions of marital status. Palin’s was mentioned twice as often (14.9 versus 7.0 percent).18

Heightened focus on Palin’s clothing / appearance and parental status may have stemmed from scandals surrounding each. Yet the finding for clothing / appearance remains statistically significant when analysis is limited to the period prior to October 20, when the wardrobe scandal broke. Likewise, the finding for parental status remains statistically significant when analysis is limited to the period between September 5 and October 20 – one week after news of her daughter’s pregnancy broke and just prior to the wardrobe scandal.

Press mentions of a female candidate’s gender, clothing / appearance, and family status have traditionally been thought to delegitimize her by treating her as novel, objectifying her, and
identifying her with the private rather than the public sphere. It is thus puzzling that such mentions were associated with more positive coverage of Palin. Figure 3 demonstrates that articles mentioning Palin’s gender were significantly more likely to be positive in tone and suggest she strengthened the GOP ticket. Similar results were found for mentions of Palin’s clothing / appearance and parental status. The findings differ somewhat for mentions of Palin’s marital status, where effects were smaller and significant for article tone only.

FIGURE 3 HERE

We did not expect gendered coverage to be associated with positivity. Granted, we do not yet account for how such coverage was processed by readers. Well-intentioned mentions of the historic nature of Palin’s nomination, for instance, may have inadvertently suggested that Palin was different, novel, and thus less legitimate. It is to such possibilities we now turn.

Coverage Effects on Reader Opinion

In order to assess the impact of Palin’s press coverage on reader opinion about her, NAES respondents were assigned measures of coverage from the paper they reported reading most often for information about the campaign. Not all NAES respondents reported reading the paper daily, and we cannot be certain they read it on the day of their NAES interview. We thus employ cumulative coverage measures up to the day each respondent was interviewed. The first is a generalized measure of tone: the cumulative positivity in headline visibility minus the cumulative negativity in headline visibility in the respondent’s favored newspaper (hereafter cumulative relative positivity in headline visibility). Three additional coverage measures record the cumulative percent of gender, clothing / appearance, and parental status mentions in the respondent’s favored newspaper.
We employ the cumulative approach given variability in respondent reading habits. Using cumulative scores also makes sense theoretically, since voters are not “blank-slates,” wiping clean everything they have heard about a candidate on a daily or weekly basis. New information is filtered through predispositions, such as partisanship, but may also add incrementally to prior information (Chong and Druckman 2007; Graber 1988). The cumulative tone measure also allows us to account for the changing nature of Palin’s tone reported above.

Cumulative relative positivity in headline visibility and cumulative mentions of Palin’s gender, clothing / appearance, and parental status are used to predict favorability toward Palin and assessments of her readiness to be president (scored from low to high) in the models below. Alternative specifications of coverage tone do not change the findings.\(^{21}\) Each model includes respondent sex, race, age, education, partisanship, ideology, degree to which followed the campaign,\(^ {22}\) and favorability toward McCain. The latter helps ensure that effects documented for Palin’s coverage are independent of favorability toward McCain. The “week” variable records when the respondent was interviewed (e.g. week 1, 2, 3 etc.) to account for events unfolding on the campaign trail. Our approach allows for variance across newspapers, as well as variance within newspapers over time,\(^ {23}\) since the changing nature of the campaign and its coverage must be taken into account.

Endogeneity is an important concern since individuals may select a newspaper based on the expectation of favorable coverage toward a particular candidate or party. Controlling for factors such as partisanship and ideology mitigates the problem somewhat. Favorability toward McCain is controlled for the same reason. Given these controls and the temporal nature of the coverage variables, it is reasonable to conclude that if a significant, positive relationship exists between coverage and Palin’s ratings, then the coverage independently contributed to the ratings.
**Effect of Coverage on Assessments of Palin**

Table 3 displays OLS regression models of favorability toward Palin and assessments of her readiness to be president using respondent attributes and coverage indicators from the respondent’s favored newspaper as predictors.\(^{24}\)

### TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Beginning with the findings for respondent attributes, it is noteworthy that respondent gender is insignificant in both models. While this is consistent with prior research (Carroll 2010; Dolan 2008), it clearly rebuts a key strategy of the McCain campaign: to attract women voters by placing a woman on the ticket.

Results for other respondent attributes are straightforward. Age is significant in both models, with older respondents rating Palin higher. Education has the opposite effect: better-educated respondents rated Palin less highly. Partisanship and ideology perform as expected, with Republicans and conservatives tending to rate Palin more highly. Respondents who followed the campaign more closely tended to rate Palin less highly, especially in terms of readiness. Favorability toward McCain is significant and positive in each model.

The variable “week” is negative and significant in both models, indicating that readers soured on Palin as the campaign progressed. In terms of effect size, Palin’s average favorability and readiness ratings were reduced by roughly one point on the 10-point favorability and readiness scales by the end of the tenth week.

Most importantly, differences in coverage are directly related to reader assessments of Palin. Table 3 indicates a significant, positive relationship between Palin’s cumulative relative positivity in headline visibility and ratings of her favorability and readiness to be president. Readers of newspapers that covered Palin more positively tended to rate her more highly. In
terms of effect size, a one-standard deviation increase in relative positivity yields a 0.15 point increase in favorability toward Palin and a 0.12 point increase in assessments of her readiness. The effects are small but statistically significant. The results thus support Hypothesis 5.

The findings for mentions of Palin’s gender, clothing / appearance and parental status are mixed. The more readers were exposed to press accounts mentioning Palin’s gender, the less favorably they felt toward her. Gender mentions were not, however, related to assessments of Palin’s readiness. Contrarily, press mentions of Palin’s clothing / appearance and parental status did not affect favorability assessments, but they approached statistical significance in the readiness model. In both cases, the sign on the coefficients is negative, suggesting that opinion dampened when readers encountered press coverage that mentioned Palin’s clothing / appearance and status as a mother. We find mixed support for Hypothesis 6.

**Effects Over Time**

As shown above, Palin’s coverage during the final weeks of the campaign was more negative than during the first weeks. Given the greater significance readers attribute to negative information (Baum and Groeling 2010; Cobb and Kuklinksi 1997; Lau 1985), as well as the cascading negativity in Palin’s press coverage, press effects may be more pronounced during the latter stage of the campaign. To test for this, we split respondents into those interviewed during weeks 1-4 versus 5-10. We expect the effects of coverage tone to be more pronounced in the latter period. We are agnostic about expectations for the other coverage variables; the literature asserts that press mentions of gender, appearance and family status are detrimental without regard to campaign stage (see Braden 1996; Falk 2008; Woodall and Fridkin 2007).
Table 4 displays OLS regressions on respondent favorability toward Palin and assessments of her readiness to be president, with separate models for weeks 1-4 and 5-10. The independent predictors are identical to those in Table 3.

**TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE**

In terms of favorability toward Palin, the control variables perform similarly during both time periods. This is not the case for the coverage variables. Coverage tone merely approaches significance in the first four weeks, but becomes highly significant – with a larger effect size – in the latter six weeks when Palin’s coverage was more consistently negative. Substantively, the effect is substantial; a one standard deviation decrease in cumulative relative positivity in headline visibility leads to an estimated 0.41 point decrease in favorability toward Palin. Similarly, press mentions of Palin’s gender and clothing/appearance are not significant in predicting favorability toward her in the first stage, but are significant (and negative) in the latter stage. A one standard deviation increase in gender and clothing/appearance mentions leads to corresponding decreases in favorability of 0.14 and 0.18 points, respectively. Mentions of Palin’s parental status are not significant in either stage.

In the readiness model the findings for the control variables are basically consistent across time periods. Findings for the coverage variables are mixed and less consistent with expectations. The tone measure is predictive in the expected direction during the first four weeks, but becomes attenuated in the latter period. Mentions of Palin’s gender have no apparent effect on opinion related to her readiness during either time period. Mentions of clothing/appearance are negatively associated with assessments of Palin’s readiness to be president during the latter period only. Mentions of Palin’s parental status depress assessments of her readiness to be president during the early stage, but not the latter.27
Discussion

Sarah Palin’s 2008 campaign offered a rare opportunity to assess how the press covered a woman running for national office, whether her coverage differed from that of her male counterpart, and how it affected public opinion. Drawing on gender, framing, and media effects theories, we hypothesized that Palin’s coverage would be disproportionately negative and would disproportionately emphasize her gender and specific aspects of it to her detriment in the public arena. We both confirm and extend existing theory on press treatment of women and its effects on voter opinion. While we acknowledge the unique aspects of Palin and her campaign, our results should give pause to those concerned with the equitable treatment of women running for elective office.

Our findings extend those of Falk (2008), Heldman et al. (2005), Lawrence and Rose (2010) and Miller et al. (2010), who report that coverage of women running for president is disproportionately negative. Though Palin was running for vice president, she was not immune from this trend. We tested two possible explanations for Palin’s disproportionately negative coverage, but neither found support. Her negative coverage was not easily explained by the faltering status of the GOP ticket. Nor did her negative coverage simply reflect McCain’s. It appears to be a further example of the disproportionately negative treatment women on the presidential trail receive from the press.

A third possibility merits consideration: might Palin’s negative coverage reflect concern about her qualifications? While 40 percent of the articles that reflected negatively on Palin mentioned her qualifications (or lack thereof), a full 60 percent did not. At best, Palin’s qualifications provide a partial explanation for the negativity in her coverage. We concur with Carlin and Winfrey who assert that “Palin was inexperienced and naïve much as Dan Quayle was
but no one made sexist comments about him and related his lack of qualifications to sex role stereotypes” (2009: 339).

Palin’s gender, clothing / appearance and family status were disproportionately mentioned in her coverage, as has been true of women seeking presidential office since the nineteenth century. But for Palin, these press mentions were associated with positive, rather than negative, coverage. One explanation is that reporters mentioned, say, Palin’s status as the “first woman on the GOP presidential ticket” in the context of a positive article about her.29 Article tone would be positive, but the gender-based stereotypes that concern Carlin and Winfrey might nevertheless be triggered. We tested this possibility by pairing our press coverage data with NAES survey data.

Press mentions of Palin’s gender dampened favorability toward her and assessments of her readiness to be president. Moreover, the harmful effect on favorability became more pronounced as the campaign progressed. Press mentions of Palin’s clothing / appearance were also negatively associated with reader opinion about her; this effect was especially pronounced in the latter weeks of the campaign. Findings were less significant for mentions of Palin’s parental status, but were directionally consistent with expectations. Prior work asserting the harmful effects of media emphasis on female candidates’ gender, appearance, and family status is thus corroborated and extended here (see Braden 1996; Falk 2008; Woodall and Fridkin 2007).

Our finding on the harmful effects of press attention to clothing / appearance is especially notable, as it corroborates prior experimental work. Research demonstrates that female candidates who are physically attractive are rated lower by study subjects (Bowman 1985; Chiao, Bowman and Gill 2008). Thus attractive female candidates are thought to be adversely affected when their appearance is emphasized by reporters. In 2008 Heflick and Goldenberg found that
experimental subjects primed to think about Palin’s appearance rated her as significantly less competent and expressed less willingness to vote for the GOP ticket (Heflick and Goldenberg 2009, 2011). Our pairing of press coverage with actual public opinion data brings this experimental result into the real world of presidential politics.

Similarly, our results on the temporal nature of Palin’s coverage tone – and its effects on reader opinion – corroborate and extend earlier work. The direct relationship we find between tone and reader opinion is consistent with extensive literature on media effects (e.g., Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Shaw 1999). But it also speaks to specific theory about the manner in which “one-sided framing” can cascade in the media, leading to more pronounced effects on public opinion (Entman 2010). Palin’s press coverage not only became more negative over time, it also became more influential. By pairing press coverage with public opinion data, we thus extend the work of Elis et al. (2010), Entman (2010), and Kenski et al. (2010).

While our study is limited to newspapers, analyses of other mediums corroborate our results. Studies of Palin’s coverage in a variety of media obtained similar results for tone (see Center for Media and Public Affairs 2009; Entman 2010; Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008a, 2008b). And by studying newspapers, we may actually understate media effects. The newspapers we coded were doubtless subject to tighter editorial control than, say, talk radio or blogs. Heldman et al.’s comparison of Palin’s coverage in top-circulation newspapers to political blogs revealed more pronounced negativity and overt sexism on blogs than in newspapers (2009). Likewise, analysis of Clinton’s presidential campaign coverage revealed offensive gendering among a variety of media, but especially online sources (Lawrence and Rose 2010). The fact that we document any effects on public opinion for Palin’s newspaper coverage may represent the proverbial tip of the iceberg.
Palin was a unique candidate on the campaign trail. She was only the second woman on a major party presidential ticket, a first-term governor, the mother of a special needs infant, with a persona that uniquely combined the feminine and masculine. Not only that, but the public knew little about her and was eager for information. A perfect storm of conditions may have been ripe for press effects. Given these factors, the generalizability of the findings to other candidates and campaign contexts is an important consideration.

Finally, campaign agency should be taken into account. The McCain campaign launched Palin’s candidacy by showcasing her family and emphasizing her gender. This may have triggered some of the gendered coverage we document. We are unable to disentangle the exact source of the press effects we identify. Emphasis on Palin’s gender and family at the Republican National Convention likely structured how the press covered Palin, and may have triggered harmful gender stereotypes. Kenski et al. (2010) go further, asserting that the press selectively applied a negative, incompetence frame to Palin but not Biden. Such selective framing could have triggered the harmful gender-based stereotype that women are less fit to serve as president and Commander in Chief. Negative stereotyping, fed in part by Palin’s poor performance in network television interviews, “undermined Palin’s image as a knowledgeable politician prepared to be president if needed,” (Graber 2010: 201). It also appears to have dampened both the tone of Palin’s press coverage and public opinion toward her.

Our findings fit neatly into long-observed trends in press coverage of women running for national office, as well as those on media effects. We both corroborate and extend theory on the effects of gendered coverage on women seeking elective office. Disproportionate negativity and emphasis on gender and related characteristics has harmful effects on public opinion. These effects can manifest even when some coverage appears positive, focused on a woman’s historic
bid for high office. They can also accelerate over time as negative press attention accumulates. For women running for office for the first time – or running in constituencies where they are not well known – these results should therefore give pause. While Sarah Palin was a unique candidate in unique circumstances, she was neither the first nor the last fashionably-dressed mother with young children to introduce herself to an electorate largely unfamiliar with her.

**Acknowledgments**

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**Funding**

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References


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Appendix A
Sample of Newspapers

Battleground State Newspapers

Denver Post (Colorado)
St. Petersburg Times (Florida)
Des Moines Register (Iowa)
Indianapolis Star (Indiana)
Minneapolis Star Tribune (Minnesota)
Kansas City Star (Missouri)*
Las Vegas Review Journal (Nevada)
Union Leader (New Hampshire)
Albuquerque Journal (New Mexico)
Charlotte Observer (North Carolina)
Plain Dealer (Ohio)
Philadelphia Inquirer (Pennsylvania)
Virginian-Pilot (Virginia)

Leading Newspapers of Record

Los Angeles Times
The New York Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Washington Post

* For budgetary reasons, the Kansas City Star was chosen over the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, although the latter had a larger circulation.
## Appendix B

### Description of Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONDENT RATING</th>
<th>Favorability toward Palin (%)</th>
<th>Palin’s readiness to be president (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey  
NOTE: Ratings range from low (0) to high (10); sample restricted to respondents who read one of the newspapers in the press coverage dataset between September 1 and November 4, 2008.
### Table 1
Volume and Tone of Coverage – Palin v. Biden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Palin (%) (except difference)</th>
<th>Biden (%) (except difference)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HEADLINE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate mentioned</td>
<td>42.2***</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone toward candidate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>43.2^</td>
<td>35.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>29.0^</td>
<td>35.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difference (positive – negative)</td>
<td>-15.4</td>
<td>-6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ARTICLE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate mentioned</td>
<td>51.6***</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone toward candidate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>34.9***</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>33.9***</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difference (positive – negative)</td>
<td>-3.8</td>
<td>+18.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** BGSU Presidential Election Press Coverage Study, 2008

- **a** Percentages based on total articles in which candidate mentioned (Palin n=1109; Biden n=585).
- **b** Percentages based on total headlines in which candidate mentioned (Palin n=472; Biden n=135).
- **c** Percentages based on total articles in sample beginning on date candidate was placed on ticket (Palin n=2148; Biden n=2449).
- **^** p < .10 (one-tailed) for difference between Palin and Biden.
- ***** p < .001 (one-tailed) for difference between Palin and Biden.
### Table 2

**Tone of Coverage – Palin v. McCain**

*Limited to articles primarily about each candidate*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive (%)</th>
<th>Negative (%)</th>
<th>Neutral (%)</th>
<th>Difference (% pos - % neg)</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HEADLINE</strong>&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palin</td>
<td>28.8***</td>
<td>43.1*</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>-14.3</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCain</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ARTICLE</strong>&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palin</td>
<td>36.2**</td>
<td>47.8***</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>-11.6</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCain</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** BGSU Presidential Election Press Coverage Study, 2008

<sup>a</sup> Headline percentages calculated based on total articles mentioning each candidate that were primarily about them.

<sup>b</sup> Article percentages calculated based on total articles that were primarily about the candidate.

* p < .05 (one-tailed) for difference between Palin and McCain.

** p < .01 (one-tailed) for difference between Palin and McCain.

*** p < .001 (one-tailed) for difference between Palin and McCain.
Table 3  
Predicting Attitudes Toward Palin  
Using Respondent Characteristics, Headline Visibility, and Gendering

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONDENT ATTRIBUTES</th>
<th>Favorability toward...</th>
<th>Readiness to be president...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0 to 10)</td>
<td>(0 to 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.101</td>
<td>0.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American or black</td>
<td>0.283\textsuperscript{^}</td>
<td>0.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other nonwhite race</td>
<td>-0.163</td>
<td>0.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.007\textsuperscript{*}</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.140\textsuperscript{***}</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID (strong Dem $\rightarrow$ strong Rep)</td>
<td>0.388\textsuperscript{***}</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology (liberal $\rightarrow$ conservative)</td>
<td>0.355\textsuperscript{***}</td>
<td>0.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following campaign (lo $\rightarrow$ hi)</td>
<td>-0.130\textsuperscript{^}</td>
<td>0.088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorability toward McCain (lo $\rightarrow$ hi)</td>
<td>0.597\textsuperscript{***}</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEWSPAPER READ BY RESPONDENT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headline visibility (cumulative relative positivity)</td>
<td>1.728\textsuperscript{**}</td>
<td>0.556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palin’s gender mentioned (cumulative %)</td>
<td>-0.015\textsuperscript{**}</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palin’s clothing/appearance mentioned (cumulative %)</td>
<td>-0.009</td>
<td>0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palin’s parental status mentioned (cumulative %)</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week</td>
<td>-0.109\textsuperscript{***}</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.017\textsuperscript{*}</td>
<td>0.516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>1732</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-Square</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model F-Statistic</td>
<td>247.606\textsuperscript{***}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Dependent variables range from 0 (low) to 10 (high). Entries are slope coefficients (b) and standard errors (s.e.) derived from OLS regressions.

\textsuperscript{^} p < .10; \textsuperscript{*} p < .05; \textsuperscript{**} p < .01; \textsuperscript{***} p < .001, one-tailed.
Table 4  
Predicting Palin Ratings Pre- and Post-Televised Interviews  
Using Respondent Characteristics, Headline Visibility, and Gendering

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONDENT ATTRIBUTES</th>
<th>Favorability toward…</th>
<th>Readiness to be president…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weeks 1 thru 4</td>
<td>Weeks 5 thru 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.145</td>
<td>0.143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American or black</td>
<td>0.161</td>
<td>0.276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other nonwhite race</td>
<td>-0.274</td>
<td>0.291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.008^</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.142***</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID (strong Dem→strong Rep)</td>
<td>0.432***</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology (liberal→conservative)</td>
<td>0.287***</td>
<td>0.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following campaign (lo→hi)</td>
<td>-0.110</td>
<td>0.132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorability toward McCain (lo→hi)</td>
<td>0.605***</td>
<td>0.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEWSPAPER READ BY RESPONDENT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headline visibility toward candidate (cumulative relative positivity)</td>
<td>0.938^</td>
<td>0.650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palin’s gender mentioned (cumulative %)</td>
<td>-0.009</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palin’s clothing / appearance mentioned (cumulative %)</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palin’s parental status mentioned (cumulative %)</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week</td>
<td>-0.168**</td>
<td>0.068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.055^</td>
<td>0.786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>794</td>
<td>937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-Square</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model F-Statistic</td>
<td>118.039***</td>
<td>128.351***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Dependent variable is R’s favorability toward Palin, ranging from 0 (low) to 10 (high). Entries are slope coefficients (b) and standard errors (s.e.) derived from OLS regressions. Weeks 1 thru 4 begin 9/1, 9/8, 9/15, and 9/22; weeks 5 thru 10 begin 9/29, 10/6, 10/13, 10/20, 10/27 and 11/3.  
^ p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001, one-tailed.
Figure 1
Candidate Visibility
Positive / negative headlines divided by total headlines

Figure 2
Article Tone Differential by Week
% positive articles toward Palin - % negative articles toward Palin

**Figure 3**
Positive Article Tone & Strengthens Ticket by Gendering of Palin’s Coverage

**SOURCE:** BGSU Presidential Election Press Coverage Study, 2008

**NOTE:** all results significant at p < .05 or better unless otherwise noted.
Lawrence and Rose (2010) examine national newspapers, network television, cable television, and political blogs.

Palin was largely unknown outside of Alaska when placed on the GOP ticket (see Newport 2008). She had many distinctive characteristics: first woman on the GOP presidential ticket; first-term governor, mother of five with a special-needs infant; and a persona that embodied both the highly feminine and highly masculine. Palin was also associated with multiple scandals, including an ethics inquiry in Alaska, the pregnancy of her unwed teenage daughter, and the use of Republican Party campaign funds to pay for clothing for Palin and her children.

Framing and priming are related but distinct concepts. Entman explains that “framing works to shape and alter audience members’ interpretations and preferences through priming. That is, frames introduce or enhance the availability and apparent importance of certain ideas for evaluating a political object” (2010: 391); see also Sheufele and Tewksbury 2007).

There is great variation in the types of media examined by scholars interested in how media frame election campaigns. Much of the research examines single media platforms, such as television news (e.g., Entman 2010; Iyengar 1987) or newspapers (Mondak 1995), though some offer comparisons across platforms (e.g., Druckman 2005; Shaw 1999) or examine numerous platforms without making explicit comparisons (Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Johnston et al 2004).

Print versions of each newspaper were employed including, where available, online PDF’s of the printed newspaper.

Given this limitation, we use the phrase “press effects” to represent strictly the impact of newspaper accounts on reader opinion.

Total circulation for daily weekday newspapers in 2008 was 48.6 million, compared to an estimated 22.9 million viewers, combined, for the three nightly network news programs and just 3.6 million nightly median viewers for cable news programs (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2012). Survey data also indicates that 45 percent of Americans read a daily newspaper, which compares favorably with watching network and cable TV news (Center for the People and the Press 2010). Survey data on where Americans get their news about presidential campaigns specifically is somewhat more mixed. Surveys indicate greater voter reliance on cable TV than newspapers in the presidential elections of 2000, 2004, and 2008 (Graber 2010). In 2008, 46 percent of respondents indicated cable TV as their main source of campaign news, compared with 33 percent for the Internet and 29 percent for newspapers. Notably, the percent of respondents citing newspapers as their main source of campaign news (29) exceeded that for network TV (24), local TV (13), radio (21) and magazines (3). Given the comparatively low numbers of viewers for cable TV reported above, the survey results appear to exaggerate their importance as news sources.
among the public. Prior (2013) demonstrates that survey results tend to exaggerate considerably viewership of cable TV, when checked against actual viewership ratings.

8 One study of the Internet in the 2008 election concluded that “Among the entire population, the internet is now on par with newspapers as a major source of campaign news – 26 percent of all adults get most of their election news from the internet, compared with the 28 percent who get their election news from newspapers” (Smith 2009: 5).

9 Findings pertaining to Biden include data beginning August 28, the first weekday following his placement on the Democratic presidential ticket.

10 Each coder utilized a comprehensive training manual that detailed individual segments of the coding form. A three-hour training session was held prior to a four-week practice coding period. Once coding for the sample commenced, coders met weekly to review criteria. Prior to data entry, each coding form was reviewed by the authors.

11 Headline and overall article tone are the most subjective variables in the dataset. To assess their reliability, nine percent of all articles in the sample were randomly selected for coding by a second coder. Headline tone yielded a Krippendorf’s alpha of .88, indicating high reliability; overall article tone yielded a Krippendorff’s alpha of .76, indicating moderate reliability (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007).

12 NAES researchers provide two different response rate calculations; we utilize their more conservative calculation of 19 percent. It is based on dividing the total number of completed interviews (57,967) by the total number of eligible households (254,382) plus those of unknown status (50,491). For additional information see https://services.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes08/phone/method/index.html.

13 Respondents were asked, “Thinking about the past week, how many days did you read a newspaper for information about the 2008 presidential campaign? This includes reading a paper copy of the newspaper, an online copy, or a newspaper item downloaded on your cell phone, iPod, or PDA.” Respondents who answered 1 to 7 days were subsequently asked, “In the past week, from what newspaper did you get most of your information about the 2008 presidential campaign?” If one of our 17 newspapers was named, the respondent was included in the analysis. On average, the NAES respondents who reported reading one of our 17 sampled newspapers reported reading it just over five days in the week prior to their interview (mean = 5.36; std. deviation = 2.25). See http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/NewsDetails.aspx?myId=263 for additional information.

14 The favorability question employed is: “For the following person, please tell me if your opinion is favorable or unfavorable using a scale from zero to 10. Zero means very unfavorable and 10 means very favorable. Five means you do not feel favorable or unfavorable toward that person. Of course you can use any number between zero and 10. On a scale of zero to 10, how
would you rate Sarah Palin?” The readiness question employed is: “On a scale of zero to 10, where zero means it does not apply at all, and 10 means it applies extremely well, please tell me how well the phrase ‘ready to be president’ applies to Sarah Palin.”

15 Fifty-seven percent of articles indicating that the GOP ticket was trailing had a negative tone toward McCain – indicative of the strong relationship between McCain’s article tone and mentions of the GOP ticket’s status (p < .001; $X^2 = 58.653$; d.f. = 4). A slightly weaker, but still statistically significant, relationship was found between the tone of McCain’s headlines and the status of the GOP ticket (p < .05; $X^2 = 11.811$; d.f. = 4). Palin’s overall article tone was only weakly related to simultaneous mentions of the GOP ticket’s status (p < .10; $X^2 = 7.901$; d.f. = 4). There was no relationship between Palin’s headline tone and mentions of the status of the GOP ticket.

16 Coders identified whether the article was “primarily about” an individual candidate or, alternatively, about two or more candidates.

17 Unlike Palin, Biden enjoyed coverage that skewed positive across virtually the entire campaign. He posted a slight negative skew in overall article tone during the weeks of September 1 and October 27 only (-1.6 and -2.7, respectively).

18 All differences statistically significant (p < 0.001, one-tailed).

19 For good discussions of the manner in which such press mentions harm women’s candidacies, see Braden 1996, Falk 2008, and Woodall and Fridkin 2007.

20 Marital status is not included in these models for several reasons. First, mentions of marital and parental status are highly correlated ($r = 0.84$) and cannot be simultaneously included due to multicolinearity. Second, Palin’s marital status was linked to Troopergate, the primary scandal that vexed her on the campaign trail. Third, the campaign emphasized Palin’s parental over her marital status. Finally, differences in parental status mentions between Palin and Biden were greater than differences in marital status.

21 In each model, similar results were found using cumulative relative positivity in overall article tone and cumulative relative positivity in headline tone.

22 Respondents were asked: “How closely are you following the 2008 presidential campaign: very closely, somewhat closely, not too closely, or not closely at all?” Responses were reordered so that 1 signifies “not closely at all” and 4 signifies “very closely.” This variable accounts for differences in how informed respondents were about the campaign (Graber 1988). As a control variable, we do not expect a particular direction.
Tone scores across newspapers differ significantly – regardless of which measure of tone is employed (p < .001). For example, the mean relative headline positivity score for Palin in the *Indianapolis Star* is 0.43, whereas in the *Los Angeles Times* it is -0.40. As well, scores vary among individual readers, since each was assigned a cumulative headline visibility score for their newspaper cumulative to the date of their NAES interview.

Due to space limitations, variance inflation factors are not shown in Tables 3 and 4. None exceeded 2.5, and most were just over 1.0, suggesting that multicollinearity is not problematic in any of the models reported.

Effect size is based on a 1-unit change in standard deviation, rather than a 1-unit change in cumulative relative positivity in headline visibility. The latter ranges from -1 to 1, but the standard deviation is just 0.089 (mean = -0.031).

The standard deviation of the percent gender mentions is 8.7. A one-standard deviation increase in the cumulative percent of gender mentions for Palin leads to a corresponding decrease of 0.13 in favorability on the 10-point scale.

As above, these effects are quite small. For example, a one standard deviation increase in the percentage of clothing / appearance mentions leads to a corresponding decrease in respondent assessments of Palin’s readiness of 0.18 during the latter stage.

Significant at p < .001 based on chi-squared test.

Indeed, the most common reference to Palin’s gender invoked her status as a “first.” The 231 total references to Palin’s gender were qualitatively coded into categories. Twenty percent fell into the modal category “first / first woman governor of Alaska / first woman on GOP ticket / historic campaign by a woman.”

For example, the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2008a) finds a greater percentage of news stories on Palin were negative (38.2 percent) than positive (28.2 percent). The study included a variety of media sectors including newspapers, cable TV, network TV, and the Internet. Similar results were found by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (2009).

Kenski et al. (2010: 9) argue that Palin’s performance during her primetime interviews and “the vice presidential debate were scrutinized through a frame in which the burden of proof was on her to establish readiness for high office, where for Biden competence was a given. Accordingly, her misstatement of the first name of a general in their vice presidential debate was treated as evidence of lack of knowledge, whereas Biden’s placement of executive power in the wrong article of the Constitution was not. And her inability to identify something Gibson called the Bush Doctrine, a construction the incumbent had never himself used, was seen not as an indictment of the questioner but as evidence of Palin’s ignorance.”