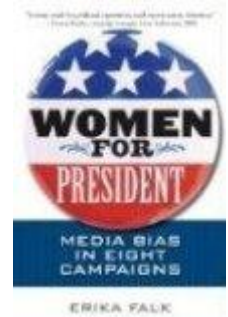


Erika Falk. *Women for President: Media Bias in Eight Campaigns.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 171 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07511-7.



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Breaking the Highest Glass Ceiling: Why No Madame President?

As the press began sounding the death knell for Hillary Clinton's White House bid, the *New York Times* quoted presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin blaming Clinton's faltering campaign on "strategic, tactical things that have nothing to do with her being a woman." [1] Despite seeming insurmountable odds of winning the Democratic nod, Clinton continued the race, but blasted the media's campaign coverage as "deeply offensive to millions of women.... It does seem as though the press, at least, is not as bothered by the incredible vitriol that has been engendered by the comments by people who are nothing but misogynists," she told the *Washington Post*. [2]

Erika Falk, the author of *Women for President: Media Bias in Eight Campaigns*, would surely agree with Senator Clinton that the fourth estate can derail a woman's chances at the polls. In her insightful analysis of press coverage of campaigns dating from 1872, when stockbroker and newspaper publisher Victoria Woodhull ran on the Equal Rights Party ticket, to Carol Moseley Braun's 2004 bid for the Democratic nomination, Falk reveals

evidence of persistent media bias. In ways both subtle and overt, Falk argues, the press has questioned the viability of a female candidate, and in doing so, has undermined women's access to political power. Although Falk's analysis was published at the onset of Clinton's campaign, the book adds a compelling historical prism through which to view the 2008 election.

In *U.S. Presidential Candidates and the Elections: A Biographical and Historical Guide* (1996), historian James T. Havel points out that more than a hundred women have run for president of the United States. Falk, associate chair of the master's degree program in communications at Johns Hopkins University, limits her study to eight female candidates who were likely to receive press coverage. In addition to Woodhull and Braun, the book explores the campaigns of Belva Lockwood (1884 and 1888), Margaret Chase Smith (1964), Shirley Chisholm (1972), Patricia Schroeder (1988), Lenora Fulani (1988 and 1992), and Elizabeth Dole (2000).

Falk culls her data from articles in the *New York Times* and the largest circulating newspaper in the candidate's home state from the time she entered the race until her withdrawal or the election. She tackles the problem of an inadequate sample size by examining all the campaigns over seven decades. Though the method allows her to spot generalities in coverage, she rightly acknowledges the difficulty of identifying trends over a 130-year span, during which time shifting social mores and journalistic styles affected press coverage.

Still, Falk's study is a giant leap forward from anecdotal collections of sexist comments gathered in previous media studies. Her quantifiable research reveals that newspapers printed half as many articles, on average, on women candidates, and the articles covering them were 7 percent shorter. She found that women were, on average, four times more likely to be described physically than men, and that the number of references to a woman's appearance did not appear to be dropping: "In 2000, the Republican candidate Elizabeth Dole was described physically about as often as Margaret Chase Smith had been in 1964" (p. 87).

Articles were more likely to note women's attire, while mentioning the age and appearance (other than clothing) of men. Women were stereotypically described as more emotional and more concerned with triviality. Even as late as 2003, the *Chicago Tribune* began a story about Braun's candidacy by noting, "A decade ago, after her election to the U.S. Senate, Carol Moseley Braun introduced a hyphen to her name after 15 years in politics. Now it's gone" (quoted, p. 40). The article went on to discuss the spelling of Moseley Braun's name and her divorce, but not much about her political platform.

Falk also notes that gender marking continues to play a role in press coverage. Earlier women candidates were likely to have their sex mentioned in a headline, as in "The Petticoat Politician: Mrs. Woodhull's Latest Epistle to the Americans--

The Limits and Sphere of Government Considered from a Female Point of View" (p. 91). Later politicians were less likely to have their gender blasted in headlines, but articles still highlighted gender either explicitly or implicitly, by use of honorifics such as "Mrs." The result, Falk posits, is that the press promotes "the association that men are natural and women are unnatural in the political sphere" (p. 96).

One problem in Falk's methodology, however, is her comparison of female and male candidates with similar projected poll results. Several studies have shown the problematic link between survey responses and actual behavior. Poll respondents may give misleading responses, particularly when they do not want to be viewed as sexist. So, for instance, Falk compares Pat Schroeder to opponent Richard Gephardt, based on a CBS/*New York Times* poll that gave her 5 percent and Gephardt 3 percent of the vote. Schroeder, however, never officially entered the race (she had a "testing the waters" campaign). Can a fair comparison be made between a Democratic congresswoman "testing the waters" and a Democratic congressman who entered the race before and left it after she did?

And while it is outside the scope of Falk's research, readers are left to wonder just how much race affected coverage of African American candidates Chisolm, Fulani, and Moseley Braun, particularly during a presidential race in which race and gender dominate headlines and airtime. Falk hints at the race issue, noting, for instance, that Moseley Braun is more frequently described as a "black" candidate than a woman (p. 92).

The only other possible quibble readers may have with the book is that the author lumps columns and straight news coverage under the same umbrella term "press coverage." Maureen Dowd may be able to get away with calling Elizabeth Dole "Little Miss Perfect" clad in "a violet suit" (quoted, p. 83) in a 1999 op-ed column, but beat reporters certainly would not. Falk should have noted the difference in standards.

Overall, however, Falk's work is engaging and illuminating--and not a complete downer. She uncovers evidence hinting that the press may be headed toward more gender-equitable coverage, although articles about candidates of both sexes may be less substantive. "The frequency with which men's appearance is mentioned may be growing," she writes (p. 90). Earlier this year, following the first presidential debate solely between senators Barack Obama and Clinton, a February 1 analysis piece in the *New York Times* noted the "shiny lavender" fashion accessory of one of the candidates. This time, Falk might happily note, the reporter was referring to Obama's tie.[3]

The current presidential campaign may also reveal a shift in the amount of press coverage received by women candidates. In her introduction, Falk reports that in the month in which Clinton and Obama announced they would run for president, "the top six circulating papers in the United States ran fifty-nine stories that mentioned Obama in the headline and just thirty-six that mentioned

Clinton" (p.1). After the book hit the presses, however, the situation seems to have changed, at least in the *New York Times*. From the time Clinton announced her candidacy in January 2007 until May 29, 2008, she earned 464 headlines in the *New York Times* as opposed to Obama's 460.

So while Clinton may end up falling short in her attempt to smash the highest political glass ceiling, she seems to have fared much better than her predecessors at the hands of the press. Thanks to Erika Falk, we can see just how far she has come.

Notes

[1]. Jodi Kantor, "Gender Issue Lives On as Clinton's Hopes Dim," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2008, A01.

[2]. Lois Roman, "Clinton Puts Up a New Fight," *The Washington Post*, May 20, 2008, C01.

[3]. Alessandra Stanley, "Smiles All Around in an Evening of Dueling Niceties," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2008, A19.

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