
Diana Zulli
Purdue University

Research on female politicians suggests that women face a double bind. Female politicians must embrace their femininity but not be too feminine, and they must demonstrate masculinity without deviating from gender norms. Hillary Clinton has often struggled with this balance, which has resulted in conflicting and inconsistent portrayals of her in the news. To examine the extent of this coverage, this study provides a longitudinal analysis of Clinton’s personal and professional media coverage in the New York Times. A content analysis of news coverage of Clinton from 1969 to 2016 shows that she has largely not been bound to gender labels, gender traits, or mentions of physical appearance. In addition, Clinton was not overly discussed as a novelty or norm challenger. These findings contradict previous literature, demonstrating a potential trend away from using gender as a descriptor for or limitation to female politicians.

Keywords: Hillary Clinton, gender issues, gender traits, gender roles, New York Times

Hillary Clinton has been an object of news interest for more than 48 years. In the New York Times, for instance, Clinton is the longest talked-about Democratic candidate (from first mention to presidential nomination) in the paper’s history (Willis 2015). Throughout this time, Clinton has played many roles. She was a lawyer, the First Lady of Arkansas, the First Lady of the United States, and a New York Senator. She ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, was appointed secretary of state shortly thereafter, and in 2016 was the first woman to earn a major party presidential nomination. As one ABC News story put it, “Her journey ... has been unlike any seen in..."
American politics: a story of great promise, excruciating setbacks, bitter scandal, stunning comebacks, and especially reinvention — of her own life, and as a result, of the role of women in government” (Noveck 2016, 5). Thus, Hillary Clinton is not only the longest talked-about Democratic candidate, but also one of the most important.

Clinton’s high profile has made her a useful object of study for those interested in the intersection of gender and media. To date, studies in this domain have focused primarily on her gender and personal attributes (e.g., Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Horn Sheeler and Vasby Anderson 2013; Mandziuk 2008; Meeks 2012). More generally, using Clinton as one example among several, scholars have determined (1) that female and male politicians are portrayed differently (Meeks 2012; 2013); (2) that men received more masculine trait and issue coverage (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Lawless 2004); (3) that scrutiny increases as women seek executive offices (Meeks 2012; Parry-Giles 2014); and (4) that female politicians are subject to sexualized discourse (Horn Sheeler and Vasby Anderson 2013; Manziuk 2008; Parry-Giles 2014).

Notably, however, Clinton may also present some challenge to these standard findings. She has been widely popular in multiple positions (CNN 2007; Href and Yang 2000), has shown support for both masculine and feminine issues (Meeks 2012), has adopted a more masculine rhetorical style (Anderson 2002b; Campbell 1998), and has defied gender norms at various points during her long career (Foran 2016; Gardetto 1997). However, scholars have not yet analyzed news coverage of Clinton longitudinally in a way that facilitates a sense of whether and how gender norms might be shifting.

The present study does so, charting Clinton’s coverage in the New York Times (hereafter NYT) across 48 years, from the first mention in 1969 to the end of her presidential candidacy in 2016. Focusing on the gendered issues, traits, roles, and characterizations the NYT has emphasized and deemphasized during this period, this study helps to answer the call of Edwards and McDonald (2010) to move past singularly studying the negotiation of femininity and masculinity in politics and provide a “more nuanced and complex view of gender as a political dynamic” (327). Instead of examining how Clinton performs masculinity and femininity in each moment or context, this analysis charts whether and how those characterizations have emerged and evolved over time in one of the nation’s key news sources. Considering that Clinton was the first female candidate to win the popular vote in a presidential election, examining such news trends has particularly weighty implications for future female politicians.
FEMALE POLITICIANS, THE DOUBLE BIND, AND HILLARY CLINTON


Such conflicting characterizations of Clinton represent the struggle for female politicians to balance femininity and masculinity. If the literature on female politicians makes one thing clear, it is that politics is still predominantly a man’s domain (see Anderson 2002a; McGinley 2009; Meeks 2012). Meeks (2012) points out that politics is primarily reserved for masculine messages and gender performances, especially at the executive level. Other scholars have noted that masculine gender traits — those associated with aggression, dominance, and toughness (Harp, Loke, and Bachmann 2010) — are viewed more favorably by voting constituencies because they are closely linked with competency to handle tough national matters (Kahn 1992; Lawless 2004). Feminine gender traits — those linked to warmth, sensitivity, mothering, and harmony — are perceived to be less desirable. Understandably then, men who embody masculine traits and promote masculine political issues receive more media coverage than women who embody feminine traits and issues (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Lawless 2004).

This reality poses challenges unique to female politicians. Women in politics must navigate the fine line of masculinity and femininity; they need to be masculine enough to demonstrate competence and leadership, but feminine enough to align with gender stereotypes. If female politicians embrace their femininity, they are perceived as incompetent and are more subject to gendered media coverage (Anderson 2002a; McGinley 2009; Meeks 2012; 2013). We see evidence of this in media coverage of Elizabeth Dole and Sarah Palin. Dole ran as a “woman’s candidate,” and thus did not receive as much coverage as her male counterparts. Palin received similar gendered trait and issue coverage, which largely overshadowed her political accomplishments as
governor of Alaska (Meeks 2012; 2013). Even though women have increasingly experienced success as politicians, gender still plays a dominant role in the types and tone of media coverage that women candidates receive (see Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Heldman, Carroll, and Olson 2005; Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; McGinley 2009; Meeks 2012; 2013).

Clinton has straddled the line between masculinity and femininity in issues and traits, demonstrating the double bind that many female politicians find themselves in (see Jamieson 1995). Before becoming the first lady, Clinton was a promising lawyer who embodied the masculine characteristics necessary of the role (e.g., debater, attacking opponents) (Campbell 1998). This tendency away from traditional expectations of femininity made her transition from career woman to first lady challenging and contested. She was cited as turning her back on the first lady tradition (Parry-Giles 2014), which was framed as dangerous and threatening to the status quo (Scharrer 2002). In fact, early polls revealed that many people were uneasy about Clinton as a first lady, so much so that “hating Hillary” became a widespread phenomenon (Campbell 1998). Certainly Clinton was not the first to be criticized for her nontraditional first ladyship; Eleanor Roosevelt, Lady Bird Johnson, and Rosalynn Carter, for example, all received disapproval for their political and activist roles (see Parry-Giles and Blair 2002). However, Clinton was more directly tied to major policy initiatives during Bill’s administration, which was ultimately perceived in a negative light (Brown 1997; Burrell 2000). Thus, while Clinton was considered a trailblazer who reinvigorated the first lady role (see Gardetto 1997), her deviation from expected first lady behaviors was met with criticism and skepticism.

Beyond Clinton’s unconventional first ladyship, scholars have primarily focused their attention on her masculine rhetorical style. Clinton earned the reputation of being pushy with Congress over her health-care reform campaign in the early 1990s (Anderson 2002b). She was the strong human rights advocate who was simultaneously the tough mother and the “bitch” (Anderson 2002b). As Campbell (1998) states, “Her tone is usually impersonal, disclosing minimal information about herself … personal examples rarely, if ever, appear. She is impassioned but very rarely emotional” (6). Sklar (2008) argues, then, that Clinton’s masculine rhetorical style ultimately overshadowed her political agenda through the years.

Nonetheless, Clinton has been wildly successful. Research on her candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008 shows
that while gendered coverage still exists, some media outlets are turning away from this trend (see Edwards and McDonald 2010; Meeks 2013). For instance, in a content analysis of the NYT during the 2008 campaign, Meeks (2013) found that the newspaper did emphasize the novelty of Clinton’s candidacy but that she received more issue coverage than Sarah Palin. Similarly, through an examination of political cartoons during the 2008 election cycle, Edwards and McDonald (2010) found no dominant or overriding gendered patterns. In fact, gender references in these cartoons were neutralized to a large extent. These scholars conclude that female politicians, especially Clinton, are becoming normalized; they are no longer novel or perceived as social and political deviants.

HILLARY CLINTON AND THE PRESS: FOUR PARAMETERS FOR ANALYSIS

Given this conflicting and broad characterization, this analysis was structured around four measurable parameters that aim to provide an overarching narrative of Clinton’s news coverage. In this context, these parameters also provided a means of developing more specific research questions and hypotheses. The first of these parameters is the gendered issues. Feminine issues tend to align with stereotypes regarding women’s nature as compassionate and caring, such as education and health care (Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003; Meeks 2013). Masculine issues implicate men as the protector and provider, such as economic issues and national security (Meeks 2013). The question of Clinton’s association with issue type and whether that changes throughout her career is of particular interest for several reasons. First, many scholars have examined the prevalence and perception of gendered issues in the media, suggesting that association with certain issues can affect political success (see Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Lawless 2004; Meeks 2012; 2013). As mentioned, masculine issues typically receive more news coverage, and they are more likely to be associated with leadership (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Lawless 2004). Second, scholars have already examined Clinton’s issue coverage in comparison with both female and male counterparts (see Meeks 2012; 2013), suggesting that more work be done in this area to examine the political landscape of female politicians. Finally, Clinton started her political career in a feminine position (i.e., first lady) and has since progressed to increasingly
more masculine positions (i.e., secretary of state, executive campaigns). Thus, I posed the following research question:

**RQ1:** To what extent did the NYT associate Clinton with masculine and feminine issues?

The second parameter for analysis was *gendered traits*. Much like gendered issues, masculine and feminine traits have political implications (see Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001; Heldman, Carroll, and Olson 2005; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b; Sklar 2008). Scholars suggest that masculine traits — those stereotypically aligned with aggression and toughness (Harp, Loke, and Bachmann 2010) — are viewed more favorably by voting constituencies because they are closely linked with the competency needed to be an effective political leader (Kahn 1992; Lawless 2004). Conversely, feminine gender traits, such as compassion, emotionality, and diplomacy, are perceived to be less desirable in political leaders (Lawless 2004). This parameter is particularly salient because scholars have characterized Clinton as possessing more masculine characteristics with negative terms such as pushy, bitchy, and “nut cracker” (see Anderson 2002b, Campbell 1998, Horn Sheeler and Vasby Anderson 2013). This consideration led to a second research question:

**RQ2:** To what extent did the NYT associate Clinton with masculine and feminine traits?

As a third parameter, this analysis focused on three expectations of *gender roles*: connection to a spouse, gender labels, and physical appearance. First, Bill and Hillary Clinton appear to have had a mutually beneficial relationship (Reston 2014). Hillary supported Bill’s rise to political prominence and Bill did the same for Hillary in the latter half of their political careers. But to an extent, Hillary had to distance herself from Bill so that she could be judged on her own merits. Her increasing accomplishments would seem to give journalists greater license to talk about Hillary as distinct from Bill. Thus, I proposed the following hypothesis:

**H1:** As Clinton becomes more prominent, references to her husband will decrease.

Additionally, Bystrom, Robertson and Banwart (2001) found that female candidates receive more attention regarding gender roles and labels (e.g., wife and mother) than do male politicians. Whereas male politicians
receive substantially less coverage regarding their children and spouse, this is a fairly common trend for female politicians. Following this scholarship and Clinton’s history as a first lady, which by definition situates the woman as a wife, I proposed the following hypothesis:

\[ H_2: \text{The NYT will frequently emphasize Clinton’s roles as wife and mother.} \]

Third, Clinton’s physical appearance has regularly been a topic of discussion throughout her political life (see Horn Sheeler and Vasby Anderson 2013; Mandziuk 2008). Clinton’s early display of the pantsuit deviated from accepted gender norms and demonstrated her refusal to abide by Female fashion and beauty expectations. However, since Clinton experienced success in increasingly prominent positions, I proposed the following hypothesis:

\[ H_3: \text{References to Clinton’s physical appearance will be more frequent during her early political career than in her later years.} \]

The fourth and final parameter explored in this analysis was Clinton’s characterization as a \textit{norm challenger}, which includes two elements: uniqueness labeling and association with feminism. Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) note that deviance is newsworthy. In the political context specifically, female politicians are considered out of the norm and thus deviant (Meeks 2012). Clinton has been labeled as unconventional since her early days as first lady (see Gardetto 1997; Scharrer 2002). She furthered solidified her reputation as unique when she became the only first lady to run for and win an elected office. Clinton was also the first female candidate to win a nomination for a major party in a presidential election — and, ultimately, the popular vote. Beyond her political accomplishments, Clinton has often been described as a feminist, and scholars note that feminist discourse (e.g., characterization as an empowered woman and a champion for women’s rights) is at play in the interpretation of her image (Brown 1997). With this history in mind, I posed the following hypothesis:

\[ H_4: \text{The NYT will frequently highlight Clinton’s uniqueness and associate her with feminism.} \]

These four parameters help demonstrate \textit{how} the NYT has covered Clinton. Three additional variables were used to provide insight into \textit{why} the NYT may have changed its coverage. The first of these is position. As mentioned, Clinton’s long political career has been accompanied by
multiple positions, some of which are imbued with gendered stereotypes (e.g., first lady being a feminine role and secretary of state being more masculine). As Huddy and Terkildsen (1993b) note, masculine traits are perceived as more critical for executive positions. Positions might therefore explain why Clinton’s association with gendered issues and traits changed as she moved through the political ranks. A second variable explored in this analysis was the tone of news coverage. The tone of political news (positive, negative, or neutral) can provide information that acts as a heuristic for public opinion and vote choice (Hopmann et al. 2010; Zaller 1992). This analysis, therefore, explored the tone associated with Clinton’s issue, trait, role, and characterization coverage. Finally, Direct quoting has a positive effect on the tone of the news coverage and can lend greater credibility to the story (Cohen 2009). Direct quoting also signals journalistic recognition of authoritative positions and can be critical to gaining respect and legitimacy in the political sphere (Korthagen 2015). Accordingly, this analysis tracked the extent to which Clinton was given a voice through the study period.

METHODS

Selection of Texts

This analysis focused on NYT coverage of Hillary Clinton from June 15, 1969 (her first mention), to November 8, 2016 (i.e., the date when Clinton’s role in national politics essentially ended). The NYT was selected for analysis (1) because it is an award-winning newspaper with a high national circulation (The New York Times 2012; BurrellesLuce 2014); (2) because its content contributes to shaping the broader news agenda (Golan 2006; McCombs 2004); and (3) because it is considered the nation’s “newspaper of record” (Golan 2006, 327). As Meeks (2012) notes, these facts point to the historical, political, economic, and daily impact of the NYT. Additionally, the NYT had a relatively consistent format and editorial approach during the study period, which facilitated an analysis of the longitudinal trends central to this study.

The texts considered for analysis included any article that mentioned Hillary (Rodham) Clinton in the NYT within the 48-year study period. Full-text transcripts were accessed via the LexisNexis database. This search process returned 39,934 articles. Given Clinton’s prominence in national politics and the broad search terms, such a large return was
expected. To keep the coding task manageable, the entire group of stories was first stratified by month (via coin flip), which resulted in 23 years with odd months (i.e., keeping January, March, etc.) and 25 years with even months (i.e., keeping February, April, etc.). The reduced grouping consisted of 20,095 articles. These articles were scanned for relevance and were included in the analysis only if they mentioned substantial information about Clinton (i.e., two sentences or more about, or quoting, Clinton). A story was excluded if it mentioned Hillary only in passing or if it used her as a reference for another topic (e.g., “On the same day that Hillary Rodham Clinton was moving from Washington to Chappaqua, NY, the former governor of Massachusetts was moving from Cambridge to the Upper East Side of Manhattan”). Duplicate articles, mentions of Clinton’s books on the NYT’s bestseller’s list, and simple reports of polling data were also excluded because these stories provided no information related to the study variables. After this procedure, 2,947 articles remained. Thereafter, every fifth story was manually coded, resulting in a final collection of 597 stories for the analysis.

Coding

Using the single story as the unit of analysis, the following categories were coded as present or absent:

Gendered Issues

This measure tracked references to masculine or feminine issues. Masculine issues align with the stereotypes regarding men as protectors and aggressors (e.g., national security or the economy); feminine issues align with the stereotypes regarding compassion or a woman’s role in society (e.g., health care, women’s rights, or education). Examples include “She has emerged as an influential voice in the great policy debates of the day, notably Afghanistan and Pakistan” and “She spent much of her speech ticking off policy proposals, walking through initiatives to expand broadband access and equal pay for women.”

Gendered Traits

This measure tracked references to masculine or feminine traits. Masculine traits include strength, assertiveness, independence, toughness, aggressiveness, confidence, etc., whereas feminine traits include warmth, compassion, emotionality, honesty, altruism, congeniality, etc. Examples include “Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton is
tough, strong, smart and a mom” and “Senator Clinton has proved that she
is warmhearted.”

References to Bill Clinton
This measure tracked references to Bill, his presidency, or his political
agenda. Examples include “All eyes remain on Hillary Rodham Clinton,
who must decide not only how to respond to him, but continues to face
questions on how to respond to the policies of former President Bill
Clinton” and “Her husband, Bill Clinton, may be the most admired
political leader in the world today.”

Gender Labels
This measure tracked references to Clinton’s gender or gendered roles,
such as female, woman, wife, or mother. Examples of this category
include “A Warren candidacy would take away a central theme expected
of Mrs. Clinton’s campaign — that it is time to elect a female president”
and “She poked fun at her zeal for the role of mother of the bride.”

Dress or Appearance
This measure tracked mentions of Clinton’s hair, clothing, or overall
appearance. Examples of this category include “Mrs. Clinton was
confronted with a series of controversies around gender roles and
stereotypes — from hairstyles to ‘co-presidencies’” and “Her peach-toned
pantsuit at first looks a wee bit Haz-Mat orange.”

Uniqueness Labels
This measure tracked references to Clinton as unique or deviating from the
norm. Uniqueness labels include any reference to being the first, a pioneer,
nontraditional, etc. Examples of this category include “Mrs. Clinton has
come under attack because she is an untraditional First Lady who wields
unusual power” and “She is a vivid example of a pioneering woman at
the top of her profession.”

Feminism References
This measure tracked references to feminism or Clinton as a feminist or
postfeminist. Examples include “So why criticize Hillary Rodham
Clinton, the feminist, for using one of her most potent assets, her
husband, to promote her candidacy?” and “Her candidacy split
Democratic women, not to mention prominent feminists.”
Tone

This measure tracked the overall tone of Clinton’s coverage and was used to assess how commentators discussed Clinton in relation to her traits, issues, gender, and roles. This category includes instances in which her characteristics, attributes, or political record were described in a positive or negative light. A positive-tone article included sentences such as “Our choice [for president], Hillary Clinton, has a record of service and a raft of pragmatic ideas” or “A lifetime’s commitment to solving problems in the real world qualifies Hillary Clinton for this job.” A negative-tone article included sentences such as “It says a lot about our relationship with Hillary Clinton that she seems well on her way to becoming Madam President because she’s not getting indicted” or “The Clintons work hard but don’t play by the rules. Imagine them in the White House.” Neutral-tone articles reported facts with no explicit opinion or framing of Clinton. Tone was categorized at the level of a full news story (e.g., if the article was mostly negative, it was coded as negative).

Voice of Clinton

This measure tracked instances when Clinton was quoted or offered a statement in any form. Examples of her quotes include “I joke that I have the scars to show from my experiences” and “I’ve taken on the health insurance companies ... and I intend to keep doing it.”

The initial analysis included articles from June 15, 1969, to June 15, 2015. As a reliability check, an independent reviewer coded approximately 12% of these articles. Using chance-corrected agreement (i.e., using Krippendorff’s α; Krippendorff 2013) for each category, the results were as follows: feminine issues (.85), masculine issues (.89), feminine traits (.88), masculine traits (.93), Bill references (.95), gender labels (.88), appearance (.88), uniqueness labels (1.0), feminism references (1.0), tone (.79), and voice (.91). To ensure that the study remained as current as possible, articles from June 16, 2015, to November 8, 2016 were added later. An additional reliability check of 12% of the entire sample was conducted by third independent coder. The results were as follows: feminine issues (.91), masculine issues (.88), feminine traits (.88), masculine traits (.86), Bill references (.84), gender labels (.96), appearance (1.0), uniqueness labels (.85), feminism references (.88), tone (.75), and voice (.94).
RESULTS

Hillary Clinton’s first mention in the NYT came in a 1969 story about her involvement in her graduation ceremony at Wellesley College. After that lone article in 1969, coverage was scant until the 1992 presidential campaign: just six articles across more than two decades. Two of these articles, one in 1983 and 1985, discussed Clinton’s connection to Bill’s education initiatives while he was governor of Arkansas. The three remaining articles occurred in 1986, 1987, and 1988: The article in 1986 discussed her appointment to Wal-Mart’s board; in 1987 she expressed her desire to have a “normal” life outside of politics to raise her daughter; and the article in 1988 covered her address to the American Bar Association. Given that so few articles about her were published prior to 1992, the remainder of this analysis focused on the 591 articles published between 1992 and 2016. To better illustrate trends related to the study variables, this time span was divided into three periods that define the key roles Clinton has played in public life: first lady (1992–1999), senator (2000–2007), and executive campaigner (2008–2016; Clinton was appointed secretary of state at the end of 2008, but speculation about a 2016 bid began immediately.)

Feminine vs. Masculine Issues

The first parameter of interest was the extent to which Clinton was associated with gendered issues. Regarding RQ1, the data suggest that Clinton was associated with feminine issues more often than masculine issues. Of the 591 stories included in this analysis, 199 stories (33.7%) associated Clinton with feminine issues, while only 132 stories (22.3%) connected her to masculine issues. Although Clinton’s association with feminine issues is one-third higher than with masculine issues, an analysis by position over time demonstrates that her connection to feminine issues peaked during her time as first lady and steadily declined thereafter [$\chi^2 = 20.164$ (df = 2); $p < .001$]. Prior to Clinton launching her own political career, news stories connected her to feminine issues as often as 50% of the time. This number dropped sharply once she was elected to a national political office in 2000. Thereafter, just 31% of the stories during her time as senator and 28.4% of the stories during her presidential campaigns made such connections. The opposite trend occurred in stories connecting Clinton to masculine issues [$\chi^2 = 35.956$ (df = 2); $p < .001$]. During Clinton’s time as a first lady, only 3.1% of
news stories connected her to masculine issues. This number drastically increased to 25.9% after she was elected to the Senate and to 28.4% during her attempts to secure a presidential bid. Figure 1 depicts these trends, revealing a convergence of feminine and masculine issue coverage throughout Clinton’s career. By the time her executive campaigns unfolded, feminine and masculine issues were equally represented in coverage about her in the NYT.

The contextual variable of voice also had significant effects on Clinton’s issue coverage. In general, Clinton is quoted 52.8% of the time when political issues are present \( \chi^2 = 39.969 \) (df = 1); \( p < .001 \). Most of the stories that mentioned her association with or stance on political issues also included her voice in those discussions. However, a separate analysis of feminine and masculine issues indicates that Clinton was more likely to be quoted in stories that connected her to masculine issues (58.3%) \( \chi^2 = 24.955 \) (df = 1); \( p < .001 \) than feminine issues (49.7%) \( \chi^2 = 12.936 \) (df = 1); \( p < .001 \). This trend suggests that the NYT may have given more credence to Clinton’s masculine political agenda, despite her long history of advocating and supporting traditionally feminine political issues.

An examination of the tone of Clinton’s issue coverage reveals that the NYT may have more positively represented Clinton’s feminine political agenda. In fact, the articles that referenced feminine issues were more likely to be positive (22.1%) than negative (10.6%) \( \chi^2 = 9.002 \) (df = 2); \( p = .01 \), which means that news coverage was more likely to praise rather
than critique Clinton’s characteristics, attributes, or political record when she was associated with issues such as education, health care, and women’s rights. Clinton’s association with masculine issues, however, showed no significant differences in tone. While Clinton’s political affiliation could explain this trend (research shows that Democrats are traditionally linked to more feminine issues), her status as a female politician is also a plausible explanation: gender norms suggest that female politicians should advocate for feminine issues. Either way, these data reveal that Clinton’s association with feminine issues was significantly associated with more positive tone in the NYT during the study period.

Feminine vs. Masculine Traits

The second parameter of interest was Clinton’s trait coverage in the NYT. Regarding RQ2, the data show a trend toward masculine characteristics. Of 591 articles, only 92 articles (15.6%) suggested that Clinton possessed feminine characteristics, such as warmth or compassion. Clinton’s association with masculine characteristics, however, is double that at 187 stories (31.6%). Whereas Clinton’s connection to political issues converged throughout her political career, no such trend occurred with her trait coverage. In fact, no statistical change in her feminine trait coverage occurred as she transitioned from one position to another. Thus, Clinton was described in no more or less feminine terms during her time as first lady than when she campaigned for executive office. However, a statistical difference in her masculine trait coverage over time was detected \( \chi^2 = 12.207 \) (df = 2); \( p < .001 \]. During her time as first lady, 37.7% of the stories included in this analysis highlighted Clinton’s masculine characteristics. This proportion peaked at 41.1% during her time in the Senate, then fell to an all-time low of 26.1% during her executive campaigns. Two hypotheses may explain this slightly upward then downward trend. Because Clinton is the first and only first lady to run for and win an elected office thus far, the NYT may have emphasized Clinton’s masculine characteristics as she made this transition. However, by the 2008 presidential race, female politicians were less of a novelty and Clinton was already well known for her masculine characteristics. That said, both Clinton’s feminine and masculine trait coverage were at their lowest point during her executive campaigns (Figure 2). This finding indicates that Clinton’s gendered characterization became increasingly irrelevant to the NYT during this third phase of her political career.
The presence of voice is also related to Clinton’s trait coverage in this analysis. Clinton was more likely to be directly quoted when she was discussed as having feminine characteristics \( \chi^2 = 18.569 \text{ (df} = 1); \ p < .001 \). Indeed, she was quoted in 59.8% of the articles that described her in feminine terms. Conversely, Clinton was quoted in 50.3% of the articles that connected her to masculine traits \( \chi^2 = 13.030 \text{ (df} = 1); \ p < .001 \). A similar trend occurred in relation to the tone of the article. An emphasis on feminine characteristics elicited a more positive tone \( \chi^2 = 23.332 \text{ (df} = 2); \ p < .001 \). In fact, 33.7% of the articles that referenced Clinton’s feminine characteristics were categorized as positive in tone, which was substantially higher than those with a negative tone (5.4%). The articles that associated Clinton with masculine characteristics were also more likely to be positive (27.3%) than negative (21.4%) \( \chi^2 = 26.476 \text{ (df} = 2); \ p < .001 \). Even though Clinton’s overall trait coverage was more likely to be positive than negative, these results suggest that her connection to masculine traits engendered more negative coverage than her association with feminine traits.

**Gender Roles**

The third parameter was gender roles, including Hillary’s personal and political association to Bill, her connection to gender labels, and
references to her physical appearance. First, Bill was referenced in almost half (41.5%) of the NYT articles included in this analysis. As expected, references to Bill did significantly decrease as Hillary progressed from first lady (59.2%), to senator (46.6%), to her executive campaigns (33.0%) \([\chi^2 = 28.223 \text{ (df = 2); } p < .001]\), which supports \(H_1\). The articles that contain references to Bill were more often categorized as having a positive tone (23.7%) rather than a negative tone (18.4%) \([\chi^2 = 12.773 \text{ (df = 2); } p = .002]\), which suggests that Bill’s presence in Hillary’s NYT coverage had a marginally positive effect. Even though references to Bill decreased over time, in terms of NYT coverage Hillary clearly benefitted from her marriage to Bill. Notably, although no statistical relationship was detected between references to Bill and Hillary being quoted in the NYT, Clinton was given a voice less often (39.6%) than when she was referenced in connection with her husband (41.5%), albeit only slightly. Despite her own political prominence, her success as a senator, as secretary of state, and securing the 2016 Democratic presidential bid — all positions that are policy driven and quote worthy — she was still somewhat associated with Bill’s legacy, even in the later stages of her national political career.

Of the 591 NYT articles in this analysis, 27.6% referred to Clinton as a wife, mother, daughter, or woman. However, \(H_2\) is only partially supported because these gender references peaked during her time as first lady then substantially decreased as she progressed to higher offices \([\chi^2 = 22.167 \text{ (df = 2); } p < .001]\). Prior to Clinton’s election to national office, 43.1% of the stories included a gender-specific label. This number sharply declined to 28.4% during her time in the Senate and to 21.4% as she launched her executive campaigns. Again, this downward trend was likely due to her familiarity as a politician; it became common knowledge that she was married, had a daughter, and was the first female politician to accomplish many things. Importantly, the tone of Clinton’s news coverage was three times more likely to be positive (38%) than negative (12.3%) when gender labels were present \([\chi^2 = 61.787 \text{ (df = 2); } p < .001]\). Voice, however, had no such relationship to gender labels.

The final factor included in the gender role parameter was physical appearance. I hypothesized that references to Clinton’s physical appearance would be quite frequent during her early political career and would wane in her later years. This hypothesis (\(H_3\)) was not supported. In fact, Clinton’s physical appearance was rarely referenced in the NYT. Only 32 of 951 stories (3.4%) mentioned her dress, hairstyle, or overall look, and the only variable related to appearance references was tone \([\chi^2 = 29.555\]
(df = 2); p < .001]. Of the 32 physical appearance stories, 50% were positive, 25% were negative, and 25% were neutral. While appearance references did peak during Clinton’s time as first lady (8.5%), no statistical differences were detected throughout her career. Furthermore, she was given no more or less of a voice when her appearance was discussed.

**Norm Challenger**

The last parameter explored in this analysis was Clinton’s characterization as a norm challenger. Specifically, I hypothesized that the NYT would frequently highlight Clinton’s uniqueness and relationship to feminism. This hypothesis (H4) was not supported. Uniqueness labels (e.g., pioneer, first, only, lone, nontraditional, etc.) were present in only 57 stories (9.6%). These references peaked during Clinton’s time as first lady (17.7%), but they significantly decreased to 7.8% during her time as senator and to 7.2% during her executive campaigns [χ² = 12.412 (df = 2); p = .002]. Additionally, these references were twice as likely to be positive (31.6%) than negative (15.8%) [χ² = 8.222 (df = 2); p = .02]. Despite Clinton often being “the first” and thus “nontraditional,” her uniqueness was not framed as deviant by the NYT. If others share this positive assessment of Clinton’s uniqueness, this finding perhaps helps to explain why Clinton experienced unparalleled success as a female politician. Being directly quoted had no effect on Clinton’s uniqueness labeling in the NYT.

Second, references to feminism were equally sparse in NYT news coverage. In fact, only 23 stories (3.9%) connected Clinton to feminism, second-wave feminism, or postfeminism. These references were also more likely to be positive (43.5%) than negative (21.7%) [χ² = 12.653 (df = 2); p = .002], which signals an important trend away from feminism as a negative political agenda or identity. Although Clinton was most often referenced as a feminist or as representing the feminist ideals during her executive campaigns (4.6%), these references remained relatively stable throughout her career. Overall, Clinton’s characterization as a norm challenger by way of uniqueness and feminist labels was not widely emphasized in the NYT.

**DISCUSSION**

Previous literature positions being a woman as a disadvantage in news coverage of American politics (e.g., Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Lawless
The evidence presented here suggests that Clinton may have ultimately overcome some of those disadvantages. For the most part, Clinton’s gender was not the dominant force in the NYT’s coverage of her. Among several examples, the clear majority of stories made no reference to Clinton’s physical appearance in any way. Whereas other scholars have claimed that Clinton has been restricted by her infamous pantsuit and unfeminine appearance throughout her political career (e.g., Mandziuk 2008), the results of this analysis indicate that Clinton’s dress and overall look were inconsequential to the NYT coverage throughout her career. Furthermore, most of the articles that do reference Clinton’s appearance do so in a positive way.

The analysis also reveals a downward trend in gendered characterization altogether because both feminine and masculine traits significantly decreased as Clinton progressed in her political career. By the time her executive campaigns were underway, both types of gendered references were at an all-time low. Considering that Clinton initially led the pack of Democratic hopefuls in the 2008 election (CNN 2007) and that she secured a presidential bid from a major party in 2016, it would be reasonable to assume that gendered references would, in fact, increase. In this regard, Clinton was still a novelty because no other female politician had achieved this level of political success. However, because Clinton had been in the news for more than four decades, her characteristics were already widely known, which might account for a decrease in both feminine and masculine trait references. Regardless, the fact that Clinton was less bound to gendered descriptors the longer she was in the political sphere is a welcome alternative from the gendered double-bind that many female politicians find themselves in (see Jamieson 1995).

Not only do these results indicate that Clinton’s gendered characterizations decreased over time, this longitudinal analysis also reveals that Clinton’s femininity was more likely to be discussed in positive rather than negative terms. The parameters of feminine traits, gender roles, and physical appearance all reflect this positive trend. Undoubtedly, Clinton’s gender has been negatively leveraged against her in mainstream media both personally (e.g., not being feminine or attractive enough) and professionally (e.g., cited as a reason for not polling better or winning elections). However, these results reveal that the NYT largely situated Clinton’s gender as either a nonissue or as an asset to her political career.

Clinton’s connection to masculine issues does adhere to the findings in previous scholarship (see Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Lawless 2004; Meeks 2004; Meeks 2012; 2013).
The NYT emphasized Clinton’s masculine political agenda as she progressed throughout her political career. She is also quoted more in articles that reference masculine issues as opposed to feminine policy initiatives, which is consistent with previous findings that a masculine political agenda receives more attention by mainstream media and is deemed more important to political success (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Lawless 2004). Clinton’s appointment as secretary of state and subsequent presidential nomination are most likely responsible for this trend; those in executive positions necessarily deal more with foreign policy, national security, and the economy. Regardless, this finding could be interpreted as a positive and substantial advancement for female politicians considering that Clinton was more often quoted when policy issues historically attached to male politicians (e.g., national security) were present.

A final observation is the scant number of references to uniqueness in the NYT. Scholarly interest in Clinton as a political figure has often been grounded in her characterization as a challenge to the status quo or as a deviant in some regard (see Campbell 1998; Scharrer 2002). Clinton has been “first” in many ways: first to be elected to office after being first lady, first female to secure a presidential bid by a major party, and first female to win the popular vote in a presidential election. With these accomplishments in mind, news media would be expected to capitalize on Clinton’s exceptionalism in one way or another, praising her for her accomplishments or expressing disapproval for her deviation from the norm. However, the few references to nontraditional and uniqueness present in the NYT situates Clinton as anything but out of the ordinary or deviant. Although the NYT recognized Clinton as unique or first (deservedly so) in a few notable moments, for the most part, Clinton’s lack of conventionalism was downplayed. Although Clinton’s political career may be essentially over, this finding potentially indicates that future female politicians may also not be bound to descriptors like “first,” “lone,” and “nontraditional,” and instead may receive coverage that focuses on their policies and contributions to the political sphere.

Overall, the fact that references to Clinton’s gender have either decreased over time or were virtually nonexistent in NYT news coverage must be considered progress for female politicians. However, these trends may be idiosyncratic to Clinton and not representative of female politicians in general. Because many of the positive trends referenced here are attributed to Clinton’s prolonged time in the public eye (e.g., decreases in gendered characterization), it is possible that women newer
to the political scene may face some of the more gendered coverage that Clinton did early on. However, it is also possible that the growth in female politicians assuages appearance, gender, trait, and issues coverage as well. Future research on the next generation of female politicians will be needed to clarify these different possibilities.

This analysis has several limitations. This characterization pertains only to the NYT and does not speak to other prominent publications. Even though the NYT is considered a leader in national news (see Golan 2006; McCombs 2004), the newspaper is said to have a liberal bias, which may explain Clinton’s positive characterization (Engel 2014). Additionally, the NYT was not the only influential news outlet during the 2016 election; information was widely circulated by cable news (e.g., FOX, CNN, MSNBC), social media, and “fake news” sources that undoubtedly contributed to Clinton’s overall characterization (Gottfried et al. 2016). In fact, research shows that partisan news sources were perhaps more influential in shaping the outcome of the 2016 presidential election than mainstream news sources (see Faris et al. 2017). Thus, future research might include other news outlets, such as broadcast news, social media discourse, “fake news,” etc., to examine the extent to which the trends reported in this study have been replicated across a variety of media and platforms.

A second limitation of this study is the inevitable connection between the executive office and a masculine political agenda. Running for executive office often includes a greater focus on issues such as foreign policy and the economy; certainly, news coverage of masculine issues increases when politicians hold executive office (Meeks, 2012). This trend is reflected in the data presented here. As Clinton campaigned for the presidency, news coverage of her masculine political agenda increased. Potentially, Clinton’s position toward the end of her career was more directly responsible for the increased reporting of masculine issues by the NYT rather than a trend away from gendered issue coverage for female politicians. As more female politicians start their careers in higher offices, future research should examine their association with gendered issues in news media to provide a fuller understanding of this finding.

A final limitation is that content analysis as a methodological approach privileges breadth over depth. While content analysis provides a greater opportunity to speak about larger patterns in news discourse, a common critique is that this approach flattens the nuance of discursive texts that can be found using other methodological approaches (e.g., rhetorical or qualitative analysis) (Tonkiss 2004). Employing content analysis may
have rendered certain gender frames invisible in this analysis. Thus, future scholarship will do well to expand on the trends reported in this analysis using a multimethodological approach. Hopefully, this longitudinal study is predictive of the political context changing in ways that make it more possible for females to seek political office without being disadvantaged by news coverage.

Diana Zulli is Assistant Professor of Public Relations and Political Communication, Purdue University: dzulli@purdue.edu.

REFERENCES


