

Gender Biases in Social Media:  
Exposing Sexist Tweets about Female Politicians

Media Honors Thesis Web Project  
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## Political Gender Biases in the Media:

### *Exposing Sexism in Politics through Traditional and Digital Media*

Democracy is only truly genuine when all citizens are represented fairly and are provided with equal opportunities for full participation in government. It is clear from the recent 2016 Presidential election that we are nowhere close to achieving full gender equity in US politics. Women are fifty-one percent of the population, yet only make up about twenty percent of all of Congress. In US history, there have been 1,917 male senators and 46 female senators (Lopez 1). Since the first elections with female candidates, scholars have written countless articles on how gender biases limit women's ability to get elected (McGregor 1). Research has found the three main causes of bias against female politicians to be media coverage, voter perceptions, and candidate strategy. I will focus on media coverage biases, specifically on how gender biases in both traditional and digital media play a role in preventing women from getting elected to public office. I will also argue that while sexism in traditional media is consistently directed towards both Democrat and Republican women equally, Democratic women face more sexism than Republican women online.

The significance of media in politics cannot be understated. The meteoric rise of traditional media such as radio and television has caused political campaigns to be increasingly media centered. News coverage is also vital in women achieving political power because it has proven to be able to influence voters in a number of ways including candidate recognition, assessment of the candidate's personality, and overall evaluations of the competing candidates (Kittlson 371). In fact, a survey found that when media coverage focuses on a woman's appearance, regardless of whether it is positive, neutral, or negative coverage, it will have

detrimental impacts on her candidacy (Pro 1). Media coverage on a woman's appearance specifically influences her favorability, her likelihood to be seen as possessing positive traits, and how likely votes are to vote for her (Pro 1). Male candidates were not affected by coverage on their appearance (Pro 1). Clearly, gender differences in campaign coverage can have a tremendous impact on who runs and gets elected for public office.

### **Traditional Media**

The way the media discusses female politicians today is deeply rooted in past coverage. From the first instance of women attempting to gain political power at the Seneca Falls convention of 1848, the media was used as a tool to delegitimize the fight for gender equality. The convention was followed by extensive ridicule from the press and an anti-suffragette postcard campaign. The newspaper *Oneida Whig* wrote, "If our ladies will insist on voting and legislating, where, gentleman, will be our dinners and our elbows?" (Lewis 1). Postcards were circulated depicting women doing household chores or suffragettes as genderless monsters (Lewis 1). The sexist arguments that women should be homemakers and be valued for their beauty are the "same old arguments, and objections rife at the start, [that] are reproduced by the press today" (Rossi 421).

After the rise of TV and radio, the media remained a tool to legitimize women seeking political power. Early research based on elections in the 1980s found that women received less prominent coverage than men and when they were covered, the media tended to focus on their lack of viability (Kahn 498). The coverage also tended to steer towards gender stereotypical topics; male coverage would focus on taxes, defense, and foreign policy, while female coverage would discuss education, healthcare, and poverty. Female candidates would

be described as honest or compassionate while men would be spoken about based on their experience and leadership (Kittlson 378). Overall media coverage was successful in undermining women by giving them less coverage that focused on “feminine” issues.

By the 1990s there was a more equitable distribution of media coverage for male and female candidates, although sexism remained. 1992 was dubbed “The Year of the Woman”(McGregor 2) and female candidates were portrayed as “positive agents of change” and covered issues like women’s health, abortion, and sexual harassment (McGregor 2). However, studies found that the women candidates received coverage that focused more on personal characteristics instead of actual political issues (McGregor 2). When speaking about a female candidate, the media would focus on her personal life, appearance, and personality. A male politician, however, would receive attention for his policies and positions (Kittlson 379). When women were asked about issues, they were usually “feminine” topics like health care, women’s rights, education, and social welfare (McGregor 2). Another study examining news coverage between 1992 and 2000 found that there were only “modest gender differences” in news coverage and that coverage in general was becoming increasingly balanced (Jalalzai 606). A 1997 study of female candidates and their campaign managers found that even the women running for office believed media coverage of their campaigns heavily reinforced gender stereotypes (Chadha 386). The 1990s showed an improvement on the amount of coverage for women, but the coverage was no less biased.

The negativity and the quantity of gender discrimination tends to increase the higher the elected office. Gubernatorial and senatorial races encounter far less media attention than presidential races do, and therefore usually encounter less gender discrimination. There are

studies that show that when running for lower offices women even receive more coverage than the male candidates, although certain “feminine” issues like education are discussed more than “masculine” topics like taxes or defense (Banwart 265). While I mostly cover sexism in higher political offices in this paper, it is important to note that gender biases exist in local and state races as well.

Gender stereotypes play a strong role in past and present coverage of female politicians. Long-standing gender biases value women if they are compassionate, caring, and trustworthy. Men, however, are valued for being dominant, decisive, and confident (McGregor 2). Unfortunately, the US political arena rewards politicians for performing the traditionally masculine traits like dominance, disagreement, or being highly-assertive. Women face an extreme disadvantage before they even start campaigning because research has shown that women “encounter more dislike and rejection than men” for exhibiting these kinds of “masculine” traits (Carroll 4). The paradox that women face of being are disliked for having masculine traits, yet it is those traits that are valued in our political system, creates an incredible disadvantage for women right from the outset. When there is such a strong bias women cannot control, it is easy to understand why so few women were running for office in the past and even today.

From its outset, traditional media has been biased against women whether they are Republican or Democratic candidates. Republican Jeanette Rankin was the first woman was elected to Congress in 1916, and it was not uncommon to see headlines about her like “Congresswoman No.1 cook and seamstress” or entire articles about her hair (Johnson 1). Almost a century later, a study of Elizabeth’s Dole run for the Republican nomination in 2000

found that the print and television coverage of Dole's campaign focused more on her appearance, sex, and viability than any of her male competitors (Kittlson 381). More specifically, 16.7 percent of the articles about Dole mentioned her physical appearance, while George W. Bush's physical appearance was mentioned 3.3 percent. She overall received less attention and more gendered coverage than her male counterparts trailing behind her in the polls (Kittlson 381). In 2008, the New York Times published an article dissecting Sarah Palin's wardrobe (Healy) and multiple articles questioned why Hillary Clinton preferred pant suits to skirts (Johnson 1). Clinton faced constant sexist attacks like "When Hillary Clinton speaks men hear, take out the garbage" (Marc Rudov, Fox News) and "When she raises her voice... it reaches a point where every husband in America has heard it one time or another" (Pat Buchanan, MSNBC). Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton, women from opposite parties and ideologies, serve as an example that sexism in the media can be "an obstacle for all women seeking elective office" (Schreiber 276). It is clear that traditional media is not partisan when it comes to sexist commentary.

### **Digital Media & Twitter**

The gendered and imbalanced media coverage of the past informs the way female politicians are spoken about in the present. While differences between male and female press coverage may have become less dramatic, remnants from past discrimination tactics still exist. Television and print media continues to differentiate politicians based on gender stereotypical qualities like policy priorities and personal affairs such as marriage status and appearance (Kittlson 381). However, as people gain more their information from digital media and social

networks, it becomes increasingly relevant to determine how gender is represented through online conversations.

Twitter is an optimal way to gain insight about how gender is relevant in political races. Users on Twitter consist of all important political actors: journalists, bloggers, the public, and even the candidates themselves. The social media site is a hotbed for a wide range of political conversation. Many people who use Twitter are unfamiliar with many aspects of political elections and learn about them while on the site. In the 2014 midterm elections, about 17% of Americans used Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to learn about the campaigns (McGregor). In the current 2016 presidential race, approximately 44% of Americans used social media to learn about campaigns each week (McGregor 2). Social media can move people to political action, with 66% of social media users have taken at least one civic or political action within social media (Rainie 1). In the 2016 presidential election, 35% of 18-29 year olds named social media as the most helpful type of source for learning about the election (Greenwood 1). 65% of adults used a digital source like a social network or news site to learn about the election (Rainie 1). With so many Americans coming to Twitter to gain information, it is incredibly important to understand the kinds of messages they are receiving.

Twitter is also a valuable source of information because it has become so influential in American politics. Twitter was used by every candidate in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 presidential elections, and allowed campaigns to reach directly to their voters, gather data, and respond to charges immediately (Combs 169). "Twitter has changed the whole way politics works," according to the digital director of Obama's re-election campaign (Combs 171). The Oxford Internet Institute even correctly predicted Obama would defeat Romney in 2012 simply

because Obama was mentioned in more tweets (Combs 171). Donald Trump uses Twitter constantly in his campaign to talk to his followers directly and bypass traditional media. It is clear that information on Twitter can be a valuable resource when it comes to understanding voters.

Gender biases on Twitter exist just as much if not more as they do in traditional media. While research shows that Twitter enables more people to be included in political conversations, “gender bias endures, albeit in new forms” (McGregor 10). A study on online sexism in gubernatorial and senate races found that women running had increased attention on Twitter but had less direct influence over what people were discussing than their male opponents. Research has also shown that “online news content still emphasizes men more than women” (McGregor 3).

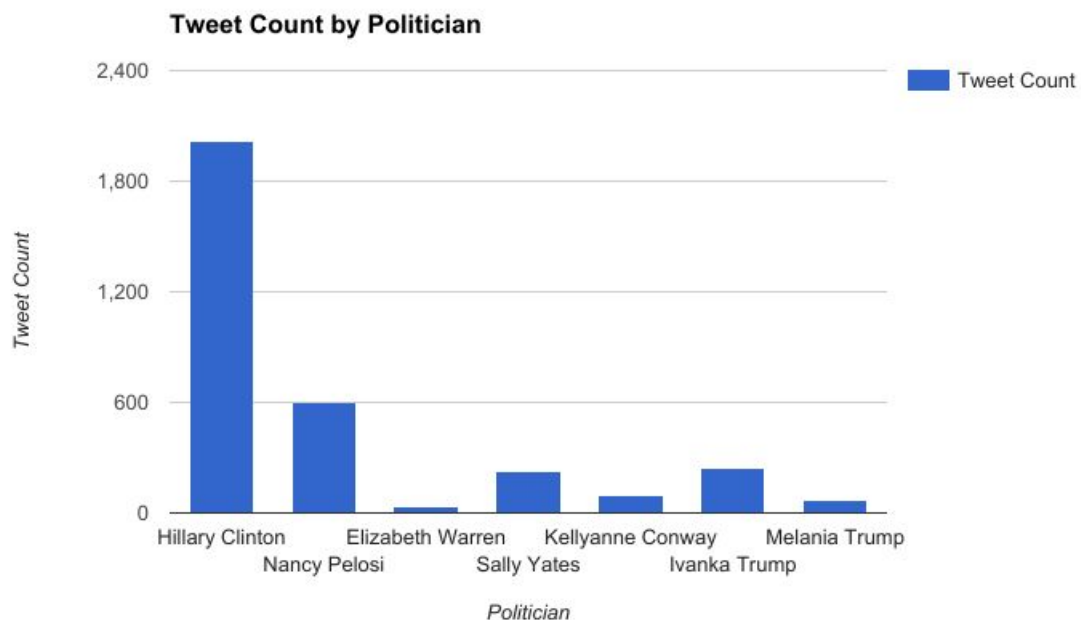
The varying degrees of sexism on traditional and digital media cannot be understated. While traditional media coverage may speculate on Hillary Clinton dropping out of the race to focus on “being a grandmother,” it was Twitter users who first started using an “Abortion Barbie” hashtag about republican governor Wendy Davis (McGregor 2). A reporter may ask a female politicians more questions about her family life or comment more on her appearance, but people on twitter have no incentive to filter themselves. It is not uncommon to see tweets like “Hillary Clinton launches Onward Together PAC. It's well past time for this CUNT to be put out to pasture. #TRAITOR” ([@VaporWarriors](#)) or “@IvankaTrump if your tiny-dick rapist dad @realDonaldTrump passes a bigot law, I hope every gay spits in your fake ass face you stupid cunt” ([@thesamkite](#)). Clearly the kind of language used against women online is far more extreme and vulgar than the language used in traditional media.



After my preliminary research, my hypothesis was that there would be just as many sexist tweets about Republican and Democratic women. I was so sure that just like in traditional media, sexism would not discriminate by party. In a New York Times article called *Sexist Political Criticism Finds a New Target: Kellyanne Conway*, Susan Chira argues the same point and writes “Misogyny, it seems, remains a bipartisan exercise” (Chira 1). She quotes tweets about Hillary Clinton and Kellyanne Conway that have almost identical sexist speech about their clothes and hair. While there may be just as equally sexist language, my research adds an important caveat: there are far more sexist tweets about Hillary Clinton than Kellyanne Conway.

Using a two week sample size from May 11 to May 25, there were 334 sexist tweets about Kellyanne Conway and Ivanka Trump combined, while there were 635 sexist tweets about Elizabeth Warren and Nancy Pelosi combined. There were 2,015 sexist tweets just about Hillary Clinton alone. To collect this data I had a script constantly running that would collect any sexist tweets and put them into a database. I ran SQL queries to get the count of tweets in the database that were about each woman. See chart below for full counts of each politician. I removed Hillary Clinton from the Democratic count with the understanding that Hillary Clinton has been in the spotlight for a long time and may be an exception to the general rule of sexism on Twitter. It is clear that my original assumption as well as the New York Times article was false to an extent. We were both correct that there is just as much sexist language used towards Democratic and Republican politicians; however, there are almost double the amount of sexist tweets about Democratic than Republican women. If we assume that the people tweeting against Democrats are most likely Republicans, it affirms the idea that Republicans

and the far-right are more prone to hate speech and anti-women beliefs than people in Democratic circles. It also affirms the belief that supporters of anti-abortion and anti-women policies are also likely to be sexist towards women in general; however, further research is necessary to prove this claim. While the language for both Democratic and Republican women is equally sexist, my research has shown there is up to double the amount of sexism for Democratic women on Twitter than Republican women.



The history of sexism in politics is a long and arduous one. From the first movement for political equality for women at the Seneca Falls Convention to Hillary Clinton's loss of the 2016 election, the media has remained fixated on female politicians' appearance, traditionally "feminine" characteristics and political issues, and family life. The paradox the media perpetuates of expecting women to be feminine while valuing masculine traits in politics is one

that hinders women from running and being elected to office. The political campaigns of Republican Sarah Palin and Democrat Hillary Clinton in 2008 show that traditional media is not partisan when it comes to gender biases in politics and that both Republican and Democratic women face comparable amounts of sexism. My original assumption was that digital media would be the same and contain just as much sexism for both parties. However, my research disproved this theory and found that Democratic women face almost twice the amount of sexism than Republican women on Twitter. More research is necessary to understand why this is, but I argue that it confirms the theory that Republicans tend to be more hateful and anti-women than Democrats. While echoes of historical political sexism remain in our media today, media coverage of women has improved dramatically since the first women ran for office, and will hopefully continue to improve as we move towards a more equitable society.

## ---Technology---

### Site Features:

On the main page, this web application will present to the user a live stream of sexist Tweets about female politicians as well as the location of where the tweet was sent, as long as the information is available. When the page loads, it calls the Twitter search API and outputs any tweet and its location (if available) within the past 10 days that contain the words 'bitch' about any of the female politicians listed below. If the user were to remain on the page, he/she would see new tweets and locations populating the feed in real time to when the user tweeted it out.

All the tweets are also being put into a database which the user can see on the page 'D v. R'. This page separates the tweets in the database by Democratic and Republican women and also has the count for the amount of tweets on each party. This page is not live and would need a refresh to see the latest tweets and counts.

The sexist tweets are determined by combining a list of sexist words and various ways of writing female politicians. The Twitter Streaming API tracks both lists and only outputs the tweet if they contain at least one element in each list. The women were chosen if they were high-profile female politicians that are consistently in the media online and in the news. The sexist words were chosen by carefully by researching sexist or gendered words that have been used in traditional media and online (Tromble 2016, Lewis 2017, McGregor 2016).

### Politicians

- |                 |                   |                   |
|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| ● FLOTUS        | ● Ivanka          | ● SallyQYates     |
| ● MelaniaTrump  | ● ElizabethWarren | ● Hillary Clinton |
| ● Melania Trump | ● SenWarren       | ● HillaryClinton  |

- Nancy Pelosi
- Elizabeth Warren
- KellyannePolls
- NancyPelosi
- Sally Yates
- Kellyanne Conway
- IvankaTrump

### Gendered/Sexist Words

- menopause
- witch
- moody
- lesbian
- nag
- bitch
- dyke
- nagging
- skank
- bossy
- shrill
- whining
- Feminazi
- ball-busting
- cunt
- PMS
- Bimbo
- Pussy
- slut
- whore
- Vagina

### Important Tools:

[Flask](#), a lightweight Python web framework that enabled me to use the Twitter API on the backend and stream the tweets live to the user

[Twitter Streaming API](#), which gives low latency access to Twitter's global stream of Tweet data in a real time stream without any polling necessary.

[SocketIO](#), which uses websockets to allow for real-time bidirectional event-based communication between server and client

[Bootstrap](#), a sleek, intuitive, and powerful front-end framework for faster and easier web development.

### Challenges:

1. Before this project most of my educational programming experience had been in Javascript and web development. I had very little experience with server-side or backend programming which this project definitely needed.
2. Figuring out how to update the tweets in real time so the user does not have to refresh to see new sexist tweets
3. Figuring out how to determine sexism in a tweet without using artificial intelligence or really complex natural language processing classification
4. Determining the best method of visualization for the tweets besides a live feed of tweets.

5. Limitations of the Twitter Search and Streaming API. Namely that the search API only goes backwards 10 days and can have 15 queries in 15 minutes and the streaming API can only stream tweets for a certain amount of time.

**Solutions:**

1. It took me a few weeks to figure out but I experimented with a few different python web frameworks like Django and Web2Py before settling on Flask. I read a lot of tutorials and watched YouTube videos for each framework but ultimately found that Flask suited the needs and scope of my project the best.
2. It was easy enough to get a feed of static tweets every time the page refreshed but to have a live feed updating in real time was an entirely new challenge for me. I did a lot of research and learned about Web Sockets, which makes it possible for the server to communicate with the client in an open connection without having to make a new HTTP request every few seconds. SocketIO is a tool that makes it easy to use web sockets and also has an extra ability to work with Flask apps.
3. Determining sexism in tweets without artificial intelligence was difficult. I ultimately decided to have an array of sexist or gendered words and an array of various ways of naming female politicians (by username, full name, or hashtag). I then looped through each array and created a new array that combines each sexist word with each politician. I then input that array into the 'track' variable of the Twitter Streaming API.
4. I went back and forth with a few options for visualizing tweets. Ultimately I thought the most compelling was a map with the geolocation of exactly where the tweets are being tweeted. This gives the application more dimension and provides the user with more insight to where the sexism is taking place.
5. I had to switch from the Twitter Search API to the Streaming API to be able to filter through more tweets. The Streaming API only filters current tweets, so to get past tweets I needed to store the tweets from the Streaming API into a database and call the tweets from the database.

**Future research and features:**

Add a panel of live news updates next to the twitter feed that is in sync with the tweets are coming in. From my experience with this project it is very clear that more tweets come in after moments of big importance, so it could be interesting as a user to see what the tweets coming in are in reaction to.

Add a feature where the user could type in the name of a female politician and sexist tweets about her would be added to the stream.

Speed up the application by having asynchronous tasks using [Celery](#). This would enable each part of the page to load separately instead of waiting for the whole page to load before the site starts.

Use Natural Language Processing and language classification to create a tool for inputting a stream of text and detecting level of sexism. This is something that I've looked all over the internet for but could not find. It could be a really valuable tool for my projects and others.

Future research and studies are necessary to conclude why there are so many more tweets about Democratic than Republican women. Sentiment analysis could be used to determine level of negativity for each set of tweets to learn more about the level of hate used by Republicans against Democrats and vice versa.

I would have liked to do more research on women of color and the unique challenges they face in political office and at the intersection of racism and sexism.

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