Research Article

The Gender of News and News of Gender: A Study of Sex, Politics, and Press Coverage of the 2010 British General Election

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Abstract

In the months leading up to the 2010 British General Election, pundits were claiming that women would be specifically targeted by all political parties. However, this focus never materialized and it was just more business as usual but with the added novelty of televised leaders' debates, which meant that coverage was more male ordered than ever. The study on which this article is based monitored articles published in the four weeks leading up to election day across twelve newspapers, comprising a mix of dailies and weekend editions, broadsheets and midmarket, and tabloid titles. The study concentrated on articles that had the election as the main story and which mentioned or sourced one or more candidates, both MPs seeking reelection, and Parliamentary Candidates. We were interested in exploring (any) differences in the news coverage of women and men candidates, looking at both frequency and content. Our findings suggest that women were much less likely to feature in news stories than men, even when controlling for Party Leader coverage. Women were much more likely to be mentioned or quoted in feature articles focused explicitly on gender issues, made interesting because of their sex and couture rather than their political abilities and experience.

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> Women should stay out of politics and out of diplomacy too. At its best it is a dirty business.
>
> (Barbara Cartland, quoted in Sreberny & van Zoonen, 2000: 1)

Introduction

The 2010 British General Election was notable for a number of reasons, not least the presidential-style leaders' debates that so fascinated the media and the fact that no party could secure an overall majority that subsequently resulted in the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition. In this article, we reflect on the gendered nature of electoral coverage in the national press. We argue that coverage was gendered in several ways: by the dominance of male candidates in the news, even allowing for the high visibility of the three (male) Party Leaders; by the marginalization of women's voices as sources; and by the preponderance of male by-lines. While these trends were discernible across both the broadsheet and the popular titles we monitored, they were more extreme in the latter. Interestingly, as we show later, some journalists acknowledged the issue of women's absence from the news agenda in their own writing, especially as news subjects, but seemed reluctant to see themselves as part of the very problem on which they pondered. Our findings suggest that women were more likely to appear in election coverage if the focus was specifically on women candidates (e.g., where only women were standing in a constituency) or where the topic was explicitly about gender, such as why there are so few women in Parliament. What was particularly striking was the small number of articles that featured several women together, while many more articles featured no women at all, so that their appearances were concentrated across relatively few stories and mostly where gender was the primary topic. This representation of women politicians as a specifically sexed group highlights the implicit but widespread assumption that national politics in the United Kingdom is a man's game, with women continuing to be framed as the novelty other, despite their numbers as parliamentary candidates and sitting MPs.

2010-Plus ça Change?

While the 2010 election campaign offered something new in the form of the leadership debates, in other ways it was business as usual. The percentage of female candidates increased fractionally compared to 2005, but this is over-shadowed by the fact that for the fifth general election running, the leaders of the three main parties were all male. The nature of electoral reporting in the United Kingdom prioritizes coverage of party leaders, although as Caroline Lucas was a strong contender to win Brighton Pavilion for the Green Party, this was by no means an exclusively male platform (see further discussion of Lucas below). Of course, Lucas was excluded from the televised

Table 1. Women Candidates and Electoral Success (%)

	2001		2005		2010	
	Candidates %	MPs %	Candidates %	MPs %	Candidates %	MPs %
Conservatives	14.9	8.4	19.3	8.5	23.6	16.0
Labour	23.2	23.0	26.3	27.6	30.3	31.3
Liberal Democrats	21.7	9.6	23.0	16.1	21.3	12.2
All candidates	19.3	17.9	20.3	20	21.1	22
Totals	*n* = 636		*n* = 720		*n* = 861	

leadership debates—there were only three pedestals in the three broadcasts. This said, while the long campaign may have suggested that 2010 was a critical election for women (Campbell and Childs 2010) because of the main parties picking up on issues such as maternity pay, flexible working, gender pay gaps, and courting the "mums-net"[1] vote, this focus quickly evaporated once the short campaign kicked in. Reporting as usual became politics as usual, echoing the 2005 long campaign, where it "seemed that women's issues were to be foregrounded . . . [but] Once the campaign proper began, women were relegated to their traditional places in the background, on the sidelines, and as leaders' wives" (Campbell and Lovenduski 2005: 190–91).

Gender bias in UK election media coverage is by no means a new development and is actually quite well documented (e.g., Stephenson 1998; Sreberny and Van Zoonen 2000). Part of the problem of (in)visibility relates directly to the fact that in both first- and second-order elections in the United Kingdom, fewer women than men are selected and then stand for election, but we argue that even accounting for such differentials that might be understood as challenges of supply and demand, women still struggle for publicity. For example, election year 1997 marked a high point in returning a record number of women MPs, largely as a consequence of the Labour Party's efforts to encourage more women to stand as candidates through their strategy of running all-women short-lists in a number of winnable constituencies. While this initiative had its detractors in those people (but mostly men) who accused Labour of sex discrimination, and the policy was indeed deemed illegal when it was subjected to a formal legal challenge, we argue that its legacy, not least in terms of agenda setting, has had clear consequences on all parties' efforts to stand more women in winnable seats, as the trends in Table 1 demonstrate. However, in the 2010 election, the majority of women candidates fielded by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats were selected for unwinnable seats, that is, those requiring more than a 10 percent swing to win and this despite the Conservatives' much publicized "A-list," which was an attempt to bring greater diversity to the Parliamentary Party in relation to gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Thus, in terms of results, there was only a marginal increase in the number of women MPs elected in 2010 (up from 128 to 142) although there are clear interparty differences. Labour continues to have both the largest number (81) and percentage of women MPs (31.6 percent): the

Conservatives managed to double the number of women MPs (to 48), but they still only constitute 16 percent of their parliamentary party. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats saw a decline in both the number (7) and percentage (12.3) of women MPs (Ashe et al. 2010). It should be noted that although women candidates only accounted for 21 percent overall, the three main parties fielded a higher proportion of women than this, but the lower percentage is accounted for by the small number of women candidates fielded by minor parties—for example, women accounted for only 9 percent of Independents, 10 percent of the English Democrats, and none of the DUP candidates (CFWD 2010; House of Commons Library 2011).

British political parties have demonstrated variable commitment to the *effective* election of women, and recent electoral history shows that both the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats have fielded relatively few women candidates, and even then, have done so in predominantly unwinnable seats, a trend repeated in 2010. While women MPs are still a minority for the Labour Party, female candidates appear to have as good a chance of being elected as their male counterparts. So although the numbers argument is a plausible one (few women = low visibility), it cannot account for women's persistent underrepresentation in news discourse nor the distinctiveness of the reportage they *do* attract. Common patterns have been identified in any number of studies that have attempted to explore this extremely problematic relationship (Kahn and Goldenberg 1991; Kahn 1994; Braden 1996; Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001; Ross 2002; Banwart, Bystrom, and Robertson 2003; Gidengil and Everitt 2003; Heldman, Carroll, and Olson 2005; Adcock 2010). What this accumulated research has shown is that news media are much more likely to focus on the personal attributes and experiences of women politicians and candidates than on their policy positions (Street 2001; Ross 2009). But really, how interested are we in where a woman politician goes shopping, the intricacies of her domestic arrangements, or who styles her hair? Such media preoccupations trivialize women and undermine their potency as political actors, both actual and in waiting (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996; Ward 2000; Sones, Moran, and Lovenduski 2005; Stevens 2007).

Research studies that have explored the ways in which women are more generally constituted in news discourse suggest that the most popular tropes for female subjects are women as victims, eye candy, or mothers (WACC 2010; Ross and Carter 2011). Somewhat disturbingly, political women seem to fare little better and are routinely commodified as women first and politicians as an afterthought, made newsworthy by their sex rather than their politics. Norris argues that women candidates are more likely to be described in terms of the personal traits traditionally associated with women (Norris 1997b). Sex-based stereotypes that both trivialize and objectify women politicians can effect women's decision to stand for elected office and can also inform voters' perceptions of candidates. In a number of recent elections where women were competing not just for Parliament but for the top job, their personal lives were scrutinized for any hint of controversy and their sexuality is always a topic of speculation where they remain unmarried or childfree (McGregor 1996; Comrie 2006; Trimble and Treiberg 2010). While the tabloid turn in news means that *all* politicians are more

vulnerable to the priapic interests of journalists (see Juntunen and Väliverronen 2010), women's more limited media coverage results in an overdetermined focus on the personal over the political.

The trivialization of women politicians through specific naming strategies can work to constitute a repetitive circuit of disavowal, perfectly captured by the soubriquet of "Blair's Babes" given to the 101 Labour women who were elected as MPs in the 1997 election. Childs (2008) suggests that subsequent representations of women politicians have often been inflected with references to those babes. While the *Mirror* first coined the phrase "Blair's Babes" in relation to several models who were planning to vote Labour in the 1997 election (Sones, Moran, and Lovenduski 2005), the label was subsequently used to caption the photo of a victorious Tony Blair surrounded by "his" women. While some women did not, apparently, object to the label, others felt it undermined the historic significance of their success (Sones, Moran, and Lovenduski 2005). Subsequently, the media used the photo and the label to characterize those Labour women as "robotic" and sycophantic (Cowley and Childs 2003).

Studies that have researched the views of women politicians themselves have noted that many distrust and resent their national media (Ross 2002; Sones, Moran, and Lovenduski 2005), although such attitudes toward the media are scarcely unique to women parliamentarians. To suggest that the British press present a gendered view of general election campaigns is not to claim anything new, and evidence of gendered reporting goes back more than a century. For example, in 1903, the *Daily Mirror* was launched as a women's paper, with a female editor and all-woman staff—albeit as a short-lived experiment—while the "new journalism" which developed in the 1930s, was characterized by "women's stories" on beauty, fashion, interior decor, and shopping, since women were seen as consumers in their own right.

In attempting to account for both the marginalization and the specificity of women's media coverage, the gendered nature of journalism and the male-ordered context of most mainstream newsrooms have been identified as crucial features of what we argue is a clearly gendered form of political communication which leads to sex-based reportage (Norris 1997a; Ross and de Bruin 2004; Lovenduski 2005; North 2009). Added to this is the fact that women have struggled to break through the media establishment and owners, editors, political commentators, and to a large extent "experts" are mostly male. The big story of the 2010 British General Election was the leadership debates—projecting the hitherto low-profile Nick Clegg into the homes and discussions of voters, and these were all (white) male affairs—not just because of Brown, Cameron, and Clegg, but because the TV ring masters were also an all-male line-up in the shape of Alistair Stewart (ITV), Adam Boulton (Sky), and David Dimbleby (BBC). We suggest that the effects of the media's portrayal of women politicians ensure that the role of politician continues to be codified as male, with women politicians as "other," most obviously signaled by the prefix "woman" in front of "politician," that is, not the typical man. In addition, broadcasting regulations play an important role as campaigns are "presidentialized," and "the problem of women's invisibility is one side effect of the conventions of modern news coverage of political campaigns" (Lovenduski 2001: 749).

Methods

So what did the press coverage of women and men candidates in the 2010 General Election look like? Our primary interest in this study was to identify any differences between the reportage of women and men candidates, both MPs seeking reelection and Parliamentary Candidates (PCs), both in terms of volume but also tone. While it was obvious that the three (male) leaders would feature significantly in new stories, backbench MPs often find it difficult to attract media attention, so the relatively high proportion of women PCs would suggest that they could expect at least the same level of media (in)visibility as their male counterparts. We were also interested to identify the extent to which women and men candidates were quoted directly in stories, given that most research on gender and news argues that men are twice as likely to be quoted as women (for recent global data on this trend, see WACC 2010). Would that pattern be repeated here?

Our sample comprised six national dailies, selected on the basis of circulation and broad political orientation: *Independent, Guardian*, and *Times* for the broadsheet (quality) press and the *Daily Express, Sun*, and *Mirror* representing the midmarket and tabloid (popular) press. In addition, five Sunday titles were also monitored: *Observer, Independent on Sunday, Sunday Times, Sunday Express*, and *Sunday Mirror*. The newspapers were monitored for the four weeks up to and including the eve of the election (April 7–May 5, 2010). Given the volume of news stories published during an election campaign, we chose to focus only on those articles that specifically featured candidates *as* candidates, rather than more general aspects of the election. Articles thus had to fulfil two criteria: (1) *at least* one candidate must be named in the article and (2) the article must focus on the MP or PC as an election candidate. It wasn't necessary that the candidate was quoted directly in articles and, in fact, many opinion and commentary pieces never gave voice to the subjects they mentioned. General articles about the election, opinion polls, league tables, and "regular" political news were excluded from our sample. A total of 381 articles were coded and analyzed, including news stories, opinion pieces/commentaries, editorials, features, and MP-authored articles. Each article was coded against a twenty-item coding frame that included basic information such as newspaper title, date of publication, article length, page number, and primary topic, and then more detailed attributes were captured such as the sex of mentioned subject/s, their party status and affiliation, if they were quoted directly, and the sex of the journalist(s) or author(s). While we also excluded articles that focused specifically on any or all of the three leaders' wives, we did code for the wives if they were mentioned in articles that also mentioned the candidates.

Read All About It: What the Papers Said

To begin the analysis, it seems sensible to discuss the broad shape of the campaign coverage we monitored and, unsurprisingly, the majority of articles (68 percent) appeared in the quality newspapers—led by the *Guardian*, whose share accounted for

28 percent of all articles surveyed—while the Sunday newspapers (all categories) contained the smallest proportion of election articles.[2] The majority of articles comprised news stories or opinion pieces covering half a page (67 percent) or more (16 percent). A small number ran to more than a page (13 percent) and a few even longer (2 percent). There was a marked buildup of press interest in the election over the four-week campaign period, with almost one-third of all election-related articles being published in week three.

A number of differences were discerned between the different titles. For example, the broadsheets produced the most column inches and, in addition, the quality press in general and Sunday editions in particular (with the exception of the *Observer*) devoted more space to election analysis in the form of commentary/opinion pieces and feature articles. The *Sunday Times* was notable in that almost 92 percent of its election coverage was given over to features. The midmarket and popular press, on the other hand, focused more on news stories rather than features or commentary; for example, the *Sun*, the *Mirror*, and the *Sunday Express* set aside 78, 50, and 64 percent respectively of column inches to "news."

Where coverage of male and female politicians was concerned, all the newspapers in our sample demonstrated a high level of gender bias in favor of men. The overwhelming majority (71 percent) of the articles we coded *only* mentioned men whereas fewer than one in ten (8 percent) only featured women, and just over one-fifth mentioned both women and men out of a total of 799 individual mentions of candidates. While there were some significant differences in mentions of women and men between the newspapers, the overall trend was to privilege men. The longer feature articles favored by the titles such as the *Independent on Sunday* and the *Observer* showed a more even-handed treatment of men and women although the *Independent*'s daily title showed a very marked preference for writing about male subjects.

The most common justifications for the lower visibility of women politicians during election campaigns are that women often constitute a relatively small proportion of candidates and this was also the case here, at 21 percent, although they were still under-reported in relation to their number (CFWD 2010: 2). More importantly, though, is how they were covered when they *did* provoke media interest. Our analysis reveals that women candidates were rarely treated as serious political interlocutors, most clearly demonstrated by the story topic of the articles in which they were mentioned or quoted. We found that the six main topics were the electoral contest and process itself (horse-race), candidates' individual policy positions, personal profiles, and two substantive policy issues (the economy and immigration). We also coded a topic as "gender and/or equality" for any article that was specifically about women candidates, such as "The Girls in Blue Spoiling for A Fight" (*Times*, April 18, 2010, pp. 4, 5); or about women's issues, such as "Parties Reveal Their Womanifestos" (*Sun*, May 5, 2010, p. 44); or otherwise featured a woman or women explicitly: these articles were mostly on horse-race topics, with a handful being about broader gender issues such as the Womanifesto article mentioned above. More generally, a range of other issues also featured, although not strongly.[3] Of the six hot topics, it was the economy, policy

Table 2. Main Topic of Article by *Mentions* of Women Candidates, Male Candidates, and Both Sexes

Main Topic of Article (Top 6 Topics)	Articles Mentioning: Women Only		Men Only		Both Women and Men	
	Count	Row (*n*) %	Count	Row (*n*) %	Count	Row (*n*) %
Horse-race	10	7.2	91	65.5	38	27
Policy position	2	5.1	33	84.6	4	10
Women/equality	5	62.5	1	12.5	2	25
Personal profile	11	9	89	73	22	18
Immigration	0	0	5	71	2	28
Economy	0	0	6	100	0	0

positions of candidates, and personal profiles that attracted the greatest number of mentions, and those mostly featured male candidates; women featured in less than 10 percent of such stories. The only topic that was mentioned mostly in relation to women candidates was that of gender and/or equality (see Table 2).

Close examination of the newspapers surveyed also shows a link between coverage of women candidates and newspaper type. For example, women candidates figured least in news articles or editorials that mostly focused on policy issues or the pronouncements and actions of party leaders. They fared best in feature articles and opinion/commentaries as these often focused on the political trajectories of individual candidates or their individual contributions to political life at national or constituency level. However, of the few candidate-authored articles coded, none were penned by women.

Turning to the question of who actually featured in the news corpus, the party leaders had an unsurprisingly strong showing and women were most likely to feature in articles if they already had a profile, that is, as members of the Government or as frontbenchers on the Conservative and Liberal Democrat side. Beyond election campaigns themselves, all backbench MPs struggle for the media limelight because of the focus on party leaders, but among Labour MPs seeking reelection, women received almost half of all mentions (49 percent), and of the 107 mentions made of Labour cabinet members, 22 percent were of women ministers. Conservative and Liberal Democrat women did not feature as strongly and female shadow cabinet members gained only 15 percent of all mentions. Women in opposition received just under a third of all the mentions of opposition backbenchers but featured particularly strongly as PCs, receiving 42 percent of all references to PCs. However, the attention given to the leaders' wives (36 of 177 mentions of women—20 percent) far outstripped that given to the combined total of women opposition backbenchers and shadow ministers. It should

Table 3. Sex of Person *Quoted* by Person/Party and/or Status

	Sex of Person Quoted					
	Women		Men		Total	
Person/Party and/or Status	Count	Row (*n*) %	Count	Row (*n*) %	Count	Row (*n*) %
Party leaders						
Gordon Brown	0	0	71	100	71	100
David Cameron	0	0	64	100	64	100
Nick Clegg	0	0	63	100	63	100
Government						
Cabinet	10	17.5	47	82.5	57	100
Govt backbench	9	42.9	12	57.1	21	100
David Cameron	0	0	64	100	64	100
Opposition						
Shadow Cabinet (Lab)	3	9.1	30	90.9	33	100
Lib Dem front bench	2	28.6	5	71.4	7	100
Opposition backbench	4	21.1	15	78.9	19	100
Other						
Parliamentary Candidate (PC) all parties	36	36.7	62	63.3	98	100
Other politicians	0	0	3	100	3	100
Leaders' wives	9	100	0	0	9	100
Total	73	16.4	372	83.6	445	100

also be noted that a number of articles mentioned several women because the focus was on women and/or equality issues. For example, the *Guardian* ran an article asking "Where Are the Women in Clegg's Top Team?"[4] in which eleven women were mentioned although none were quoted directly. Or a *Times* article, titled "Whatever Happened to the Iron Ladies?" (April 24, 2010, p. 45) in which four women were mentioned, three of whom were quoted. Given that most articles mentioned or quoted only one or two candidates, this kind of gendered overexposure in one article works to skew the overall results since, in this case, 10 percent of *all* mentions of women MPs/PCs were contained in just *two* articles. It is also very clear, though, that *all* candidates struggled to achieve any kind of media attention, given that more than 43 percent of all mentions of MPs and PCs were of the three party leaders.

On the positive side, women PCs were mentioned nearly as often as their male counterparts despite accounting for only 21 percent of all PCs, although they fared less well as sources, contributing 36 percent of all PC quotes and 16 percent of all quotes: the leaders' wives were quoted almost as frequently as Labour women ministers (see Table 3).

Overall, most of the individuals mentioned and quoted were candidates from the two main parties. With the exception of Nick Clegg, the smaller parties found it very difficult to achieve any press coverage. While we did code a few mentions of candidates from parties such as the SNP, UKIP, Sinn Fein, and a few independents, the minor party that attracted most interest was the Green Party, with most coverage going to Caroline Lucas, the Party Leader. Articles featuring Lucas contributed a good number of the stories, which we coded as "women/equality"—which is positive inasmuch as it gives visibility both to a senior woman politician and a change from politics-as-usual but again skews the findings in terms of the generality of women's media presence, not least in relation to the number of mentions and quotes of women PCs. Given that Lucas won her seat and became the Green Party's first and only MP at Westminster, we suggest that her media visibility contributed significantly to her "brand" recognition and thus to her success.

As well as looking at candidates and content, we were also interested to explore the extent to which women journalists covered election stories and whether the sex of journalists made any difference to story topic or use of particular sources. Our findings suggest that across all the newspapers surveyed, the majority of articles (80 percent) were written by male journalists, reflecting other studies that have examined this aspect of campaign coverage (see Ayers and Lawson 2011; Chambers, Steiner, and Fleming 2004; Cochrane 2011; Rehkopf and Reinstadler 2011). There were also clear differences across newspapers, with women more likely to be writing for the *Guardian* than any other newspaper we monitored, although the almost complete absence of women writing in the *Independent* was startling (see Table 4).

As far as mentions of candidates and their use as sources was concerned, our findings suggest that men are more likely to write about men than women were to write about women. That nearly three-quarters of all articles written by male reporters were about male candidates is unsurprising given both that 43 percent of all mentions were about the three Party Leaders and that political news and "scoops" in the British media are often informed by private conversations and connections. When working for the *Guardian*, the journalist Joanne Coles likened press conferences to public school where a few clever girls were invited to attend as a special privilege but where they were always outsiders (Coles 1997; see Table 5).

Case Studies

So far, we have presented our quantitative analysis but we also undertook a more detailed exploration of a number of news articles which had a specific and overt "gender" aspect. These articles exemplify the different ways in which journalists (and their proprietors) chose to report on women politicians, from the sexist extremism of the *Sun*, to the mixed messages of Janet Street-Porter, to the more even-handedness of the *Independent on Sunday* and the *Observer*. Each, in their own way, say important things about the broader issues of women's potency as serious political actors.

Table 4. Sex of Journalist/Author by Newspaper Title

	Sex of Journalists/Author							
	Women		Men		Mixed-Sex Team		2+ Men	
Title	Count	Row (*n*) %	Count	Row (*n*) %	Count	Row (*n*) %	Count	Row (*n*) %
The Sun	5	13.9	30	83.3	1	2.8	0	0
Daily Express	2	8.3	22	91.7	0	0	0	0
The Guardian	36	33.6	63	58.9	8	7.5	0	0
The Independent	1	1.5	61	89.7	1	1.5	5	7.4
Independent on Sunday	2	28.6	4	57.1	1	14.3	0	0
The Mirror	2	7.4	18	66.7	0	0	7	25.9
The Observer	5	41.7	2	16.7	5	41.7	0	0
Sunday Mirror	2	25	5	62.5	1	12.5	0	0
Sunday Times	3	25	5	41.7	0	0	4	33.3
Sunday Express	3	27.3	7	63.6	1	9.1	0	0
The Times	10	19.6	40	78.4	1	2	0	0
Total	71	19.6	257	70.8	19	5	16	4.4

Table 5. Sex of Journalist/Author by Number of Articles Mentioning Only Women, Only Men or Both Sexes

	Articles Mentioning:					
	Women Only		Men Only		Both Women and Men	
Sex of Journalist/Author	Count	Row (*n*) %	Count	Row (*n*) %	Count	Row (*n*) %
Women	9	12.7	45	63.4	17	23.9
Men	18	7.1	178	70.4	57	22.5
Mixed team	0	0	17	89.5	2	10.5
2+ men	0	0	15	93.8	1	6.3
Total	27	7.5	255	71.0	77	21.4

1. The Page 3 Debate

One of the most high-profile ways in which women and women's issues were covered by the media was found in a series of articles published in the *Sun*. In April 2010, The Fawcett Society, the United Kingdom's leading women's civil society organization, held a hustings event with the three main parties to discuss women's issues. During

this event, at which Harriett Harman for Labour, Theresa May for the Conservatives, and Liberal Democrat Lynne Featherstone spoke, the panelists were asked for their thoughts on a campaign calling for the *Sun* to scrap its infamous page 3 girl. While May prevaricated, responses from both Harman and Featherstone indicated enthusiasm for the idea. The following day, the *Sun* launched a campaign to save page 3, including "News in Briefs," which featured two topless women "Lynne from Hornsey" and "Harriet from Peckham" (*Sun*, April 29, 2010) and culminated with the May 5 edition that featured sixteen topless women under the headline "Save These Girls from the Dole Tomorrow" (*Sun*, May 5, 2010). Both Harman and Featherstone were accused of trying to "ban beauty" and of denying women their human rights. Indeed, one edition included a riposte from one of the page 3 girls, "Poppy," offering her own thoughts on liberty and individual freedom: "The basis of Lockean thought is his theory of the Contract of Government, under which all political power is a trust for the benefit of the people. His thinking underpins our ideas of national identity and society. Please don't let those who seek to ban our beauty win. Vote to save Page 3!" (*Sun*, May 5, 2010) The response of the paper was not dissimilar to the criticisms levelled against Clare Short during her decades-long campaign to ban page 3, starting with her Private Members' Bill in 1986 (see Short 1991). The representation of Harman and Featherstone as being opposed to equality and liberty chimed with the antifeminist rhetoric of the newspaper and both women were portrayed as killjoys and, more importantly, as being out of touch with mainstream British society.

2. *"In an Election Dominated by Men What's in It for Women Voters?" (*The Observer*, April 25, p. 28)*

This article was one of a handful that specifically acknowledged the absence of women and women's issues from the election discourse. While it focused mainly on the lack of visibility given to policy issues of direct concern to women, framed within discussions with and between a range of women voters, it also raised questions about the low profile of senior women MPs such as Yvette Cooper and Theresa May. Of course, the absence of women from the campaign was heightened by a focus on the Party Leaders: "The focus on the three leaders to the exclusion of senior women appears to be part of a deliberate US-style strategy . . . with the spotlight on the 'first ladies'" (*The Observer*, April 25, 2010). However, rather than simply providing a summary of what the three main parties were offering women in relation to specific policy issues, the article explored a diverse range of issues with women voters from Peterborough, including childcare, the economy, and defense. Many of the women interviewed expressed their frustration at the low number of women in politics and suggested that increasing the number of women's voices at Westminster would have a significant impact on the tone of the debates and on legislative outcomes. The article also highlighted the importance of hearing "ordinary" women's voices rather than focusing on "Samantha Cameron's frocks or Sarah Brown's Tweets" and the need for women to feel engaged on a range of issues facing the country. The *Guardian* made a

similar point in their article, "Women Candidates Upstaged by Wives."[5] By exploring policy beyond the traditional confines of "women's issues," the *Observer* article illustrated how women's absence at a national level was compounding a sense of marginalization among women voters.

3. "Be Afraid. Janet's on the Stump" (Independent on Sunday, *April 25, pp. 49–51)*

Very few articles ran stories about women PCs on the campaign trail, so Janet Street-Porter's account of three such candidates, representing the three main parties, campaigning in the marginal constituency of Islington South and Finsbury was an interesting exception (*Independent on Sunday*, April 25, 2010). As one might expect from a journalist who sees herself as a feminist, Street-Porter describes the grind of campaigning in inner city London. The unglamorous settings of an old church, a primary school, and a supermarket are far removed from the bright lights of the televised debates. Salient local issues include the proposed closure of a hospital, the number of police on the beat, and the scarcity of green spaces. Street-Porter is well qualified to comment on the issues. She has lived in the area since 1986 and tracks the demographic changes she has seen over this time, arguing that more than half the residents live in social housing in proximity to private properties worth more than £3 million. She contrasts the poverty-ridden situation of immigrants with that of the wealthy inhabitants of luxury loft conversions and penthouses.

Mostly, this article is positive about the candidates' political aptitude, so it is surprising that Street-Porter also includes commentary on how they look, thus undermining her earlier focus on their professional abilities. Discussing Fox's "lime-green suit, easy to spot. Elegant white linen jacket. All very pulled together, nothing too threatening. Smart bob." She remarks of Thornberry, her "garish red blazer, gruesomely obvious" and "well cut, perky hair"; and of Cox, wearing "jeans and a shirt worn with a pretty necklace" but who would be more at home in a "suit and pearls."

Although Street-Porter's conclusion reminds readers of the difference between the real campaign experience of these parliamentary candidates and the typical reporting of the general election campaign that focused on leaders and televised debates, her comments about the women's style and manner of dress are gratuitous and add nothing of substance to the article. That Street-Porter feels it necessary to write about the women's sartorial style suggests that even experienced, women-friendly journalists are not entirely immune to the masculine culture of the newsroom, or perhaps genuinely believe that readers are interested in such details.

4. "Can This Woman Change British Politics Forever?" (Independent on Sunday, *April 25, pp. 4–5)*

This article, written by journalist Michael McCarthy, is unusual in that it is a factual account of the campaign work of a PC, albeit one who has built up a strong media

profile. Caroline Lucas, the first leader of the Green Party for England and Wales, stood in the Brighton Pavilions constituency and, McCarthy writes, "Caroline Lucas's major achievement has been to make the Green party electable, or at least to stop it from being a political joke." He praises her achievements to date and situates her campaign within the wider context of British and European politics. McCarthy believes her success would bring Britain into line with the rest of Europe and bring some radicalism into Parliament. He argues that the Party's lack of electoral success, at least in terms of Westminster, has been due to the rejection by many grassroots party members of the "cult of leadership," but Lucas changed that by leading the campaign to have one party leader and then becoming that figure. Not only had she changed the party but broadened its policies and appeal, adding a concern for social justice to its traditional environmental interests.

McCarthy writes positively about Caroline Lucas and compares her success with that of Petra Kelly who led the German Green Party into the mainstream of German politics thirty years earlier, concluding: "If the electors of Brighton Pavilions vote as the bookmakers think they will on 6th May, Britain may have a Petra Kelly of its own." McCarthy's account sits in contrast with that of Street-Porter (see above) and may even be accused by some of being too serious, even "boring," and of failing to offer sufficient insights into the personality and personal life of Lucas. It stands out, however, as a good example of how to report on women in politics without needing to elaborate on their personal lives. However, even here there seems to be the persistent desire to compare Lucas with Kelly just because they are both women and both leading the Green Party of their respective countries.

Conclusion

The 2010 elections were promoted as being the "mumsnet" election, where women's issues (masquerading as "gender" issues) would at last be taken seriously, where women voters would be specifically courted and where parties which had poor track records in selecting women candidates would be fielding more women PCs and putting them in winnable seats. However, our analysis demonstrates that gender was decidedly off-message and off the agenda in terms of media interest and women journalists were similarly under-represented in the corpus of articles we monitored. Partly, this was because of the news media's preoccupation with the Leaders' debates and in particular, their strange fascination with Nick Clegg meant that the vast majority of sitting MPs and PCs (both men and women) enjoyed less media visibility than they might have expected. Too many of the women who *did* appear were the putative first ladies or occasionally a citizen like Gillian Duffy who prompted one of Gordon Brown's gaffes or were covered for their novelty value, such as Green Party Leader and candidate Caroline Lucas. Historically, one of the most obvious ways in which women have achieved a profile in electoral campaigns is as "moral supporter" or family member of a high-profile candidate. We suggest that the "family" is a very useful

campaign tool that is frequently invoked by (male) politicians in the belief that it helps to make them look more ordinary, more human, more like the man-next-door. Indeed what was notable in our analysis was the intense media focus on Sarah Brown, Samantha Cameron, and Miriam Gonzalez Durantez—the party leaders' wives. In contrast, for those who lived through the British political climate of the 1980s, it is difficult to forget that Margaret Thatcher was frequently commented on for her *less than* feminine political traits. Rosenbaum (1997) claimed that the use of family in party political campaigning is not a new phenomenon and the wives of Clement Attlee and Anthony Eden were highly visible in the 1955 election campaign. In the 1970s, Harold Wilson commented that being able to appear with his wife was a "positive advantage" compared to Ted Heath, who was a bachelor (and comments were made about Gordon Brown's bachelor status at the time of John Smith's death in 1994). During the 1992 election campaign, Norma Major and Glenys Kinnock appeared more often in the national daily press than any politicians with the exception of the party leaders and Thatcher, with senior advisers telling John Major that his wife was a "powerful vote winner in her own right" (Rosenbaum 1997: 192).

Even in seats being contested by controversial women MPs such as Hazel Blears and Jacqui Smith, where political capital could be expected to have been made by the media over the continuing scandal of MPs' expenses, their appearances were few and far between. Where women *did* feature in news, it was often in stories that were about women specifically, so that their sex was the most interesting thing about them, rather than their potential or previous experience as serious political actors. That such stories also mentioned and/or sourced several women at a time contributed to the aggregate number of women whom we coded in our analysis but skewed their overall visibility since it was not spread evenly over a large number of articles but instead concentrated on a few, gender-focused examples, most of which were written by women journalists. However, it should also be said that most of these articles were features, a format that women journalists are more likely to write than "straight" political journalism and where journalists often have more autonomy to work their own line. Although this study's findings echo those of so many others focused on the women–politics–news nexus, it is disappointing that so little has changed, especially since nearly one-fifth of Britain's MPs are women, which, while still lamentably low, still suggests that their media visibility should be rather higher than appears from our findings.

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1. This refers to a website (www.mumsnet.com) set up in 2000 that according to its homepage, aimed to "Make parents' lives easier by pooling knowledge, advice and support."
2. *Guardian* (108), *Independent* (70), *Times* (60), *Sun* (37), *Mirror* (30), *Express* (24), *Observer* (12), *Sunday Times* (12), *Sunday Express* (10), *Sunday Mirror* (9), and *Independent on Sunday* (8) = 381 articles.
3. E.g., coalition government, fashion, Gillian Duffy, and constituency profiles.
4. *The Guardian*, May 1, 2010, p. 17.
5. *The Guardian*, April 21, 2010, p. 20.

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