

# **On Their Best Behaviour?**

**Newspaper Journalists' Coverage of Women Council  
Candidates During the 2007 Alberta Municipal Election**

**Angelia Wagner**  
**Political Science Department**  
**University of Alberta**

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# **On Their Best Behaviour?: Newspaper Journalists' Coverage of Women Council Candidates During the 2007 Alberta Municipal Election<sup>1</sup>**

Angelia Wagner<sup>2</sup>  
University of Alberta

## **ABSTRACT**

Do women in municipal politics encounter the same level of media bias as women in national politics? Does every type of newspapers exhibit a bias against women municipal politicians, if at all? These questions guided a study of how three daily and three community newspapers portrayed women council candidates during the 2007 Alberta municipal election. Using content and discourse analysis, the study compared how journalists reported on female and male candidates' personal traits such as age, appearance, family situation, gender, and emotions as well as their policy ideas and public utterances. Results from the study indicate that while local women politicians do face a subtle sexism, the media environment they encounter while campaigning is generally more gender-neutral and hospitable to them than the one awaiting women vying for elite national office. Thus, scholarly belief that the media can act as a psychological barrier to women's candidacy are largely unfounded at the municipal level. Women contemplating a bid for council should not be concerned that local journalists will obsess about their looks or otherwise overtly disadvantage them before prospective voters.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The news media can wield considerable influence over how voters perceive women politicians. Reporters can trivialize them in the eyes of the public by obsessively covering details that have no bearing on their jobs—such as the colour of their lipstick, the style of their coiffure, or the absence of a wedding ring on their finger. Columnists can further undermine women candidates by judging them in ways that implicitly question whether they belong in the political sphere, while editors can signal the importance of a woman's candidacy, or the lack of it, simply by where they place stories about her campaign in a newspaper or broadcast. Yet the press can shape public perceptions of women politicians in even more subtle ways. Headlines are a fixture of newspaper layout, but editors can manipulate their size, style, and placement on a page to either draw readers' attention to an article on a woman candidate or cause them to overlook it. Reporters can also disadvantage her simply by the format in which they choose to write election stories: regular news items often focus on the machinations of the campaign instead of on the issues, while profiles always provide personal details about a candidate's life. Potentially more damaging, though, are the editorial decisions that journalists make on a daily basis, such as how much they will cover a woman's campaign activities, report on her policy ideas, or even quote the candidate herself.

After examining media practices for more than two decades, most scholars have concluded that journalists regularly use words and images to portray women as unwelcome actors in

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1. This paper is based on the author's master's thesis research project.
  2. Angelia Wagner has been a journalist for more than 20 years.

the political sphere. But their insights into media behaviour, while instructive, are mainly based on studies of how major daily newspapers and, to a lesser extent, national television networks have depicted women holding or seeking national office. Ignored are all the other news organizations that comprise most of the media in Canada: weekly newspapers, radio, community television, magazines, and Internet news sites. Women holding municipal office have also been largely overlooked in research on women in Canadian politics, despite the fact they constitute the largest group of women in public life. In short, scholars know a great deal about how a small group of journalists cover a small group of women politicians, but little about the media environment that other types of women politicians encounter.

This study aims to test current theories on media bias toward women politicians by exploring how different types of newspapers covered women municipal candidates during the 2007 Alberta civic election. I argue that considerable diversity exists among newspapers in Canada due to variations in circulation, publishing frequency, and newsroom size, and that these structural factors influence how a newspaper covers politics. For example, most community newspapers employ only a few journalists to produce one small issue each week, while major daily newspapers often have more than a hundred news professionals to get their multi-section product to the newsstand each day. Small newspapers thus do not have the reporting staff or the editorial space to approach election coverage in the same way as large newspapers and therefore might not cover women politicians in the same way, either. In this essay, I begin by reviewing the literature on press portrayals of women politicians before discussing how daily and community newspapers covered both women and men council candidates. I then assess whether the sex of the reporter played a role in election coverage for either group of candidates. I conclude with some observations about media representations of women municipal politicians and suggestions for future research.

## **STYLE VERSUS SUBSTANCE**

So why do the media view women as political outsiders? Virginia Sapiro (2003) argues the answer lies in the construction of politics as a masculine domain, with men traditionally dominating political systems and leadership positions. Since gender is an important interpretive tool, she argues the masculine norms of politics do not easily enable women to fit in. Social stereotypes about gender also disadvantage women, as they presume women and men to have separate qualities that make politics a more natural sphere for men. Sapiro insists gender remains central to how women politicians are evaluated throughout their career, since ideas about masculinity and femininity “carry important connotations about character, capabilities, and behavior that have potentially important political significance” (1993: 145). Gender only fades in importance as a female figure becomes familiar, suggesting that more women in politics might reduce the salience of gender in the future. In the meantime, women continue to encounter gender stereotyping in various aspects of politics, including media coverage.

One way journalists police the “masculine” boundaries of politics is through the information they choose to highlight—and obscure—when covering a woman’s candidacy. Research on

women in national politics has found a consistent pattern of the media focusing on women's personal characteristics at the expense of their policy ideas (Aday and Devitt, 2001; Falk, 2008; Manning-Miller, 1996). The media's obsession with physical appearance is a particular and ongoing source of irritation for women politicians (Ross and Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997). Women politicians believe their sartorial style is often used by journalists to question their fitness for public office, while scholars go further and suggest the media discuss fashion as a means of reinforcing traditional gender roles (Mandziuk, 2008; Anderson, 2002; Bystrom et al., 1999; Vavrus, 2002) and the male-identified norms of elite political office, such as president, prime minister, or party leader (Devere and Davies, 2006; Bathla, 2004).

Just as media use fashion to create the impression that women do not "fit" politics, they often point to family responsibilities to suggest politics might not be the right "fit" for women. Key here is the *perceived* conflict between women's private roles as wives and mothers and their public roles as politicians (Herzog, 1998; Robinson and Saint-Jean, 1991; Van Zoonen, 1998), a conflict men are generally not portrayed as experiencing (Muir, 1998). Highlighting a woman's age can do the same work as mentioning her children, with journalists asking how young mothers can adequately combine family and politics. A more direct method of triggering traditional gender stereotypes is by what Erika Falk (2008) calls a "gender marker." This is a word or phrase that explicitly states the gender of the person to whom it is being applied, such as *woman* or *lady* politician.

However, journalists repeatedly noting a woman's gender is arguably not as damaging as their coverage of her emotions. Examining more than a century of newspaper coverage, Falk (2008) found women presidential candidates in the United States were just as likely to be described emotionally in 2004 as they were in 1872. She warns that "by using more emotional descriptions in the coverage of women than men, the press may have reinforced and amplified the stereotype that women are emotional and irrational and therefore unfit for leadership while creating a contrasting picture of men as less emotional, more rational, and more leaderlike" (2008: 56). Falk interprets this behaviour as evidence of how deeply ingrained stereotypes can be in society.

To sidestep these stereotypes, women politicians often rely on issue coverage as a means of giving voters alternative information with which to judge their candidacies. But research suggests this approach has had mixed results. Some scholars have discovered discrepancies between how the media report on women and men candidates, with journalists writing more about men's policy ideas than they do women's (Bystrom, 2005; Heldman et al, 2005; Kahn, 1994a, 1994b; Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991; Serini et al, 1998), while others have found that a candidate's sex does not appear to play a role in how much issue coverage the media doles out (Jalalzai, 2006; Miller, 2001; Rausch et al, 1999; Smith, 1997). Only a few studies have measured how much the media allow women candidates to speak for themselves, and their findings contradict each other. In one instance, researchers found that Elizabeth Dole, the lone woman seeking the U.S. Republican presidential nomination in 2000, was significantly less likely to be quoted by the media than her male competitors (Aday and Devitt, 2001). In

contrast, Falk's longitudinal study found female presidential candidates were quoted slightly more than their nearest male challenger over a 132-year period.

Scholars are also conflicted about the influence of women journalists on election coverage. Kay Mills argues women journalists have transformed the definition of news in general and political news in particular, thereby shaping "the climate of opinion in which women decide to run for office. Women as reporters helped bring women candidates into the mainstream of coverage" (1997: 50). But others question the extent of this agency, especially considering journalism, like politics, is based on masculine norms (Allan, 2004). Empirical research reflects this disagreement, with some studies showing that female reporters have a negative influence on women politicians' coverage (Ross, 1995, 2002) and another study demonstrating that they have a positive one (Devitt, 2002).

Current research therefore suggests the following research questions for this study of media depictions of women vying for civic office: Do women municipal politicians encounter the same media bias as their national counterparts? Does every type of newspaper exhibit a bias against women municipal politicians, if at all? And do women journalists influence municipal election coverage overall and for women municipal politicians in particular?

## **METHOD AND MEASUREMENT**

To investigate how various types of newspapers cover women seeking municipal office, I developed a classification system that categorizes newspapers according to their circulation size and publishing frequency. In all, I identified five types of newspapers in Canada. The most common is the *community newspaper*, which publishes once or twice a week and has a circulation that can range from just a few hundred copies to more than 100,000. The *small-circulation daily newspaper*, like all dailies, publishes from five to seven days a week but it has a daily circulation of less than 25,000. A *medium-circulation daily newspaper* distributes an average of more than 25,000 and less than 100,000 copies a day, while a *large-circulation daily newspaper* ranges from 100,000 to less than 200,000 copies. The least common type of newspaper is a *major-circulation daily newspaper*, which averages more than 200,000 copies a day. Canada only has five major newspapers and all are located in Ontario and Quebec, including the country's two national titles, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*.

With these categories in mind, I selected the *Tofield Mercury*, *Millet Pipestone Flyer*, and *St. Albert Gazette* community newspapers as well as the small-circulation *Red Deer Advocate*, the medium-circulation *Edmonton Sun*, and the large-circulation *Edmonton Journal* daily newspapers for this study. The only type of newspaper not examined is a major-circulation daily, which Alberta does not have. Although the selected newspapers are all located in central Alberta, I argue this did not produce a geographical bias in the sample as each publication is representative of their particular type of newspaper, both in the province and across Canada.<sup>3</sup>

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3. This observation is based on my professional experiences working as a journalist at community and daily newspapers for more than 20 years.

At any rate, my choices were limited as only the community newspaper category offered more than a few titles for examination: Alberta has just two large dailies, two medium dailies, and five small dailies from which to choose.

For the study, I gathered all election stories printed in the six newspapers from September 1, 2007 until the election on October 15, 2007, including news articles, candidate profiles, columns, and editorials. Since the purpose of the study is to assess media bias, items clearly not written by journalists were excluded, such as letters to the editor. I also ignored stories focused exclusively on mayoral campaigns, as the local media appeared to treat council and mayoral candidates differently, with the latter subjected to coverage more typical of party leaders contesting elections at the provincial and federal levels. The final sample consisted of 182 stories, with the *Journal* contributing 85, the *Sun* 34, the *Advocate* 28, the *Gazette* 12, the *Mercury* 11, and the *Pipestone Flyer* 11.

Both content and discourse analysis were used to examine newspaper coverage. Content analysis is a systematic, objective, and quantitative research technique that examines message characteristics in written, visual, and audio communication (Neuendorf, 2002; Neuman, 2007) while discourse analysis is “a qualitative methodology that acknowledges that language is a form of social interaction and focuses on its meaning based on the cultural and social contexts in which it is used” (Trimble and Sampert, 2009: 56). All election stories were analyzed using a detailed coding system, a set of instructions on how to systematically observe and record content from a text. The codebook incorporated a series of direct and indirect measures in order to quantitatively assess media depictions of women and men council candidates. The variables dealt with personal traits, issue coverage, and length of quotations as well as sex of reporter and story type. Each candidate-related variable examined women and men as individual groups and not as individual candidates. An intercoder reliability test conducted by two independent coders resulted in a Cohen’s kappa of 0.915, a strong score that indicates different coders using the same codebook would generally arrive at the same raw data (Landis and Koch, 1977).

## **ELECTION COVERAGE CHARACTERISTICS**

Women comprised one-quarter of all candidates vying for a council seat in the six municipal elections examined in this study. Of the 25 women candidates, 14 sought public office in Edmonton, five in Red Deer, two in St. Albert, two in Wetaskiwin, and two in the County of Wetaskiwin. Beaver County featured an all-male slate. Overall, the Edmonton election accounted for 43 of the 98 council candidates in this study with the remaining 55 candidates campaigning in the other five municipalities.

The number of candidates to cover was one factor among many that influenced how each newspaper put together an election package. A 24-hour publishing cycle and larger space for editorial content enabled daily newspapers to cover the civic vote more extensively than their community counterparts; the dailies produced almost 81 percent of the total number of



news items, or 147 stories out of 182. The large-circulation *Journal* was in the best position to report on the election due to its larger editorial staff, page dimensions, and page count, resulting in 85 stories for 46.7 percent of the overall total. Still, it could not offer extensive coverage of each candidate because of Edmonton's ward-based electoral system and the enormous number of individuals competing for each council seat as a result. The medium-circulation *Sun* covered the same long list of candidates as the *Journal*, but its smaller reporting staff and page sizes meant its story count was substantially smaller, at 34 stories for 18.7 percent of the total. The small-circulation *Advocate* had the best circumstances of the three dailies: it operated in a city with an at-large system that resulted in a more manageable list of candidates, it employed several reporters, and it had a large page size that enabled it to publish 28 stories throughout the campaign (15.4 percent).

The community newspapers could not be as comprehensive in their coverage as the dailies due to their longer news cycles and smaller page sizes. The *Gazette* published two issues a week, a fact it took advantage of to provide voters with a lot of information about the mayoral and council candidates in St. Albert and surrounding communities. However, this study only examines reporter-generated stories about the St. Albert council campaign, resulting in a low story count for the *Gazette*. The two smaller weeklies, the *Mercury* and the *Pipestone Flyer*, could not compete with the other four newspapers in terms of amount of election coverage due to their once-a-week publishing schedule. Together, the *Gazette*, *Mercury*, and *Pipestone Flyer* devoted 35 stories to the election (19.2 percent). As a result, almost two-thirds of the stories included in this study focus on the 43 candidates seeking a seat on Edmonton city council and the remaining one-third of stories was shared by the 55 candidates contesting office in the other municipalities.

Breaking down coverage according to gender, the study found that female council candidates were featured in just 92 of the 182 stories while male candidates appeared in 160 stories.<sup>4</sup> As for journalists, male reporters penned 37.4 percent of all news items compared to 29.7 percent for female reporters, with another 0.5 percent co-authored by a male and female reporter. The remaining stories did not have a byline, so the sex of the writer(s) could not be determined.

## **FINDINGS**

### *Personal traits*

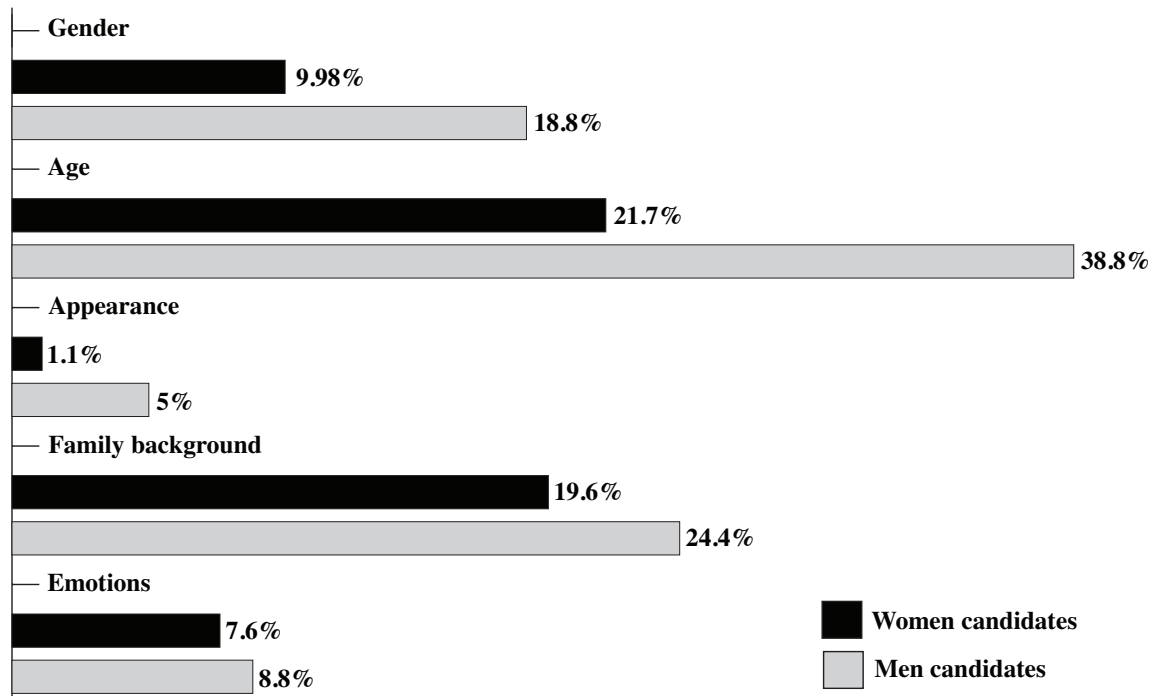
Results from the content and discourse analysis suggest the media bias that women politicians encounter in national politics is less prevalent in municipal politics. As Figure 1 shows, journalists mentioned personal traits less often for female candidates than they did for male candidates throughout the six-week period under study. Male candidates were twice as likely

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4. Women's and men's respective story counts were used when calculating their individual results to provide a more equitable comparison of the coverage devoted to each group. A story that does not mention a female candidate cannot, for example, include a reference to her personal traits.

**FIGURE 1**

Personal trait mentions of women and men council candidates during the 2007 Alberta civic election  
(as a percentage of stories mentioning women or men candidates)



to see local journalists highlight their gender, with it mentioned in 18.8 percent of their stories compared to 9.8 percent for female candidates. However, journalists typically gendered men in their individual profiles (53.3 percent), where it is common to share personal and professional details about a candidate, and less often in news stories (30 percent). In contrast, they included gender markers for women candidates in news stories as often as they did in profiles (44.4 percent), suggesting a woman’s gender plays a subtle role in her evaluation as a prospective municipal politician.

The discourse analysis reveals that many of the gender references were made in relation to a candidate’s family situation or profession. For example, men were often described as a “father” or “married man” while women were called a “mother” or “single woman.” The frequent use of gendered professional descriptors in election coverage reflects the media’s emphasis on simple terms over awkward variants, such as “businesswoman” instead of “businessperson,” though they do prefer gender-neutral terms whenever possible, such as “firefighter” rather than “fireman” (Tasko, 2006: 23). An *Advocate* story announcing the candidacy of a former Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer provided the only instance of a gendered term in a headline: “Former policeman wants seat on council.” Candidates were responsible for several of the gender references found in election coverage, though these were often prompted by the questions the media asked for candidate profiles.



Age was the most common personal trait raised in relation to both female and male candidates, suggesting that many journalists view this detail as an important piece of information voters should have when deciding how to cast their ballots. Journalists noted a man's age in 38.8 percent of stories and a woman's in 21.7 percent. Not surprisingly, approximately two-thirds of all age references for both women (65 percent) and men (67.7 percent) appeared in candidate profiles, where such biographical information is common. Age was the only personal trait that saw a statistically significant difference between dailies and weeklies. A series of chi-square tests revealed that daily newspapers were significantly more likely than community newspapers to include the age of a female candidate ( $\phi=3.833$ ,  $p<0.05$ )<sup>5</sup> or a male candidate in a story ( $\phi=6.094$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). A significant portion of all age mentions involved a person's actual chronological age. In the rare instances where adjectives were used, journalists typically reserved them for young candidates, especially in stories about how political hopefuls were using the Internet and social networking sites like Facebook to draw the interest of young voters. No gender differences were noted in the discourse analysis, but young candidates appeared to be more likely than older candidates to have their age mentioned in regular news articles.

Appearance was the personal characteristic least likely to be mentioned for either women or men. A male candidate's appearance was noted in five percent of stories compared to 1.1 percent for women candidates. The lone reference to a woman's appearance was made by the candidate herself during a Red Deer forum, where one of the election issues discussed was bullying. She attempted to demonstrate empathy with contemporary victims by recalling a story about how she had been victimized by girls who had cut her hair as a joke when she was younger. Interestingly, references to appearance were reserved exclusively for male candidates. A *Journal* columnist noted that one man had lost 12 pounds by knocking on 15,000 doors since he began campaigning, while another one was "also looking svelte" after dropping 35 pounds by "removing most of the sugar, fat and beer from his diet." On the surface, these comments about their looks appear to trivialize the male candidates, but feminist scholars argue that personal trait coverage can actually help, not hinder, male candidates by depicting them as modern men (Muir, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2005).

Like other personal trait depictions, men were subjected to greater scrutiny of their marital status or family background than were women. More than 24 percent of stories about male candidates noted a man's family ties while 19.6 percent of stories about female candidates described a woman's family connections. The candidate profile was the single greatest source of family descriptions for both women (72.2 percent) and men (69.2 percent) with regular news stories comprising the rest for women (27.8 percent). The remaining family mentions for men were found in news stories (23.1 percent) and columns (7.7 percent).

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5. Conclusions should be drawn carefully for the correlation between newspaper type and age mentions for women candidates as the cell count assumption of the chi-square test was not met. One of the nine cells did not have the five-case minimum.

The level of family mentions for both women and men candidates was not unexpected considering the nature of civic politics: voters want to know how deep candidates' roots are in the community or ward they seek to represent, which they often demonstrate by noting how long their family has lived in the area. And this information is expected of all candidates regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or other personal characteristics. Women in local government therefore face a potential Catch-22 situation. If they mention their family roles, they risk invoking gender stereotypes that position them as outsiders in politics. But if they do not mention their local roots, they risk being viewed as outsiders in the community.

The factual nature of family references in newspaper coverage suggests this should not be a huge concern for female council aspirants. Local journalists refrained from referencing traditional gender roles to explicitly question any woman candidate's suitability for civic office, offering details about their home life as nothing more than biographical data. The source of this information—reporter or candidate—also varied by newspaper. In the large-circulation *Journal*, candidates were typically responsible for mentioning their spouses, children, and other family members, usually prompted by queries made by the newspaper for its question-and-answer style candidate profiles, while reporters produced most of the family mentions in the medium-circulation *Sun*. The small-circulation *Advocate's* family mentions mainly appeared in the short candidate profiles. The reporter for the weekly *Pipestone Flyer* offered only factual descriptions of female and male candidates' families in the brief profiles. Family references were non-existent in the semi-weekly *Gazette*.<sup>6</sup>

The *Gazette* was equally sparing in its emotional depictions of municipal candidates, recording its lone mention for a female candidate who expressed either anger or annoyance during an all-candidates forum about a series of power lines on an area lake: "Yes, Elke, I'll move the damn power lines." Overall, female candidates were not commonly portrayed as emotional in civic election coverage, with 7.6 percent of stories including such a reference for women compared to 8.8 percent for men.<sup>7</sup> The *Journal* produced more than half of all emotional mentions, with 10 for the men and four for the women. The other five newspapers managed no more than eight emotional mentions amongst themselves, with the three community newspapers offering just one mention each, suggesting media portrayal of women as less rational than men might mainly be the work of larger daily newspapers. Additionally, despite the rarity of emotional references for both women and men, journalists were almost three times more likely to mention the emotional state of candidates than the candidates themselves. Of greater concern, though, is where emotional references appeared in election coverage. The media noted women's emotions most often in regular news stories (57.1 percent) but discussed men's state of mind more in candidate profiles (42.9 percent)

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6. The lack of family references in this newspaper is likely due to the fact the *Gazette* sample does not include any candidate profiles, the largest source of such information. The *Gazette* permitted candidates to write their own profiles, and this study only examines items written by journalists.

7. The amount noted in the content analysis seems high, but this result can partly be attributed to my cautious approach to coding: I searched each story for any words or phrases that contained even the slightest hint of feelings.

**TABLE 1**

Issue mentions for women and men council candidates during the 2007 Alberta civic election (as a percentage of stories mentioning women or men candidates)

NEWSPAPER	WOMEN CANDIDATES		MEN CANDIDATES	
	ISSUE MENTIONS		ISSUE MENTIONS	
	<i>Within paper</i>	<i>Within all papers</i>	<i>Within paper</i>	<i>Within all papers</i>
Edmonton Journal (n=38, n=72)	73.7%	48.3%	77.8%	47.5%
Edmonton Sun (n=25, n=34)	32.0%	13.8%	44.1%	12.7%
Red Deer Advocate (n=17, n=23)	82.4%	24.1%	87.0%	16.9%
St. Albert Gazette (n=9, n=11)	55.6%	8.6%	81.8%	7.6%
Tofield Mercury (n=0, n=11)	N/A	N/A	90.9%	8.5%
Millet Pipestone Flyer (n=3, n=9)	100.0%	5.2%	88.9%	6.8%
<b>Total (n=92, n=160)</b>	<b>63.0%</b>	<b>— —</b>	<b>73.8%</b>	<b>— —</b>

than in regular stories (35.7 percent). Although the discourse analysis found few instances of journalists highlighting extreme displays of emotion by either women or men candidates, the fact they treated the two groups differently in terms of where these depictions appeared suggest that, even at the municipal level, the media continue to subtly question whether women have the mental equilibrium to hold public office.

### Issues

Just as Alberta newspapers appeared to be careful not to trivialize women municipal politicians by focusing too much on personal traits, they portrayed women as substantive candidates by opting to pay close attention to campaign platforms. Female candidates' stances on topics ranging from taxes and roads to public parks and the arts were mentioned in 63 percent of their stories. Men fared better at 73.8 percent, but the high level of issue coverage for both groups suggests journalists took a serious approach to the 2007 municipal elections.

Not surprisingly, the three dailies produced the lion's share of the issue coverage examined in this study. A newspaper's ability to disseminate policy ideas depends in large part on how frequently it publishes and the amount of editorial space available in each edition. With their larger reporting staffs and news holes, dailies were best positioned to investigate and discuss the hot topics of the local campaign. As Table 1 shows, the *Journal* was responsible for almost half of the issue mentions for both female (48.3 percent) and male candidates (47.5 percent), likely a function of its greater overall election coverage. However, the *Advocate*, and not the *Sun*, was second on this list, providing 24.1 percent of all issue mentions for women and 16.9 percent for men compared to the *Sun*'s 13.8 percent for women and 12.7 percent for men.

The three community newspapers, with their weekly publishing schedule and smaller space for editorial content, supplied only a small percentage of the total issue mentions for either

group. The *Gazette* did a much better job than the *Pipestone Flyer* and *Mercury*, though, in terms of the quality of issue coverage it provided, demonstrating that an interested community newspaper can still offer voters a grounding in the issues. The two smallest weeklies shortchanged politicians and voters by printing only candidate profiles, foregoing any regular news coverage of the candidates. Policy ideas thus competed with a candidate's personal and professional details for limited space in the profiles. If this approach is the norm for weeklies, then women in small communities should not worry about media bias so much as a general lack of media coverage.

On the plus side, all newspapers except the *Sun* included details about women's and men's campaign platforms in a majority of their election stories about each group. Yet differences again cropped up in terms of where women's and men's policy ideas were discussed in overall election coverage. Most issue mentions for women appeared in regular news stories (62.1 percent) with candidate profiles a distant second (31 percent), while men saw an event split between news stories (47.5 percent) and candidate profiles (46.6 percent). Two conclusions can be drawn from this data. First, journalists consistently portrayed men, but not women, as substantial candidates throughout all types of election coverage. And second, women need to more aggressively promote their campaign platforms in their candidate profiles, especially in light of the fact small newspapers tend to rely on them for their election coverage.

### Quotations

Aside from issue coverage, another way in which journalists make candidates appear substantial is to quote them at length in a story. Daniel C. Hallin argues that hearing a politician speak at length gives the public "a feeling of understanding something of the person's character and the logic of his or her argument," enabling them to judge the person for themselves (1992: 19). Yet his research on shrinking American television soundbites suggests journalists are mediating political messages to an ever greater degree (1992: 9).

This mediation also has a gendered aspect. During the 2007 civic election, reporters did not permit women candidates to speak for themselves to the same degree as they did men

**TABLE 2**

Average word length of quotations for women and men council candidates in six Alberta newspapers in 2007

<b>NEWSPAPER</b>	<b>WOMEN CANDIDATES</b>	<b>MEN CANDIDATES</b>
Edmonton Journal (n=38, n=72)	83.26	113.74
Edmonton Sun (n=25, n=34)	17.12	35.79
Red Deer Advocate (n=17, n=23)	35.71	61.48
St. Albert Gazette (n=9, n=11)	36.67	95.73
Tofield Mercury (n=0, n=11)	N/A	347.00
Millet Pipestone Flyer (n=3, n=9)	2.00	0.78
<b>OVERALL (n=92, n=160)</b>	<b>49.29</b>	<b>98.11</b>

candidates. As Table 2 shows, women were quoted an average of 49.29 words per story compared to 98.11 words for men, with *Journal* readers the most likely to “hear” from female candidates at 83.26 words per story, followed by the *Gazette* at 36.67 words and the *Advocate* at 35.71 words. The men had a high of 347 words per story in the *Mercury*, due to the fact its election coverage largely consisted of candidate profiles done in a question-and-answer format that allowed the all-male slate of candidates to speak entirely in their own voice. Without the *Mercury*, men were quoted an average of 79.73 words per story. Still, male candidates were quoted extensively in the five other newspapers, with the *Journal* at 113.74 words per story, the *Gazette* at 95.73 words, and the *Advocate* at 61.48 words. The *Pipestone Flyer* barely quoted candidates of either sex. Overall, both daily and community newspapers quoted men candidates more than women candidates, though these results were not statistically significant.

But was this pattern consistent through all types of election coverage? The *Mercury* was not the only newspaper to use a question-and-answer format for its candidate profiles, suggesting the quote totals for women and men might vary depending on whether an election story was a news article, profile, column, or editorial. Examining the data by story type, I found that both groups of aspiring councillors were mostly quoted in news stories and profiles, and that men candidates were quoted more than women candidates in both categories. In regular news stories, men received an average of 63.42 words per article compared to just 25.23 words for women. The gap between men and women widened in candidate profiles, with men getting a whopping 141.59 words per story to speak for themselves while women received just 34.36 words. Thus, voters in Alberta did not get the same chance to evaluate the logic of a woman’s argument as they did a man’s.

#### *Sex of Reporter*

Evidence suggests a reporter’s sex played a role in how women and men candidates were depicted during the 2007 Alberta municipal election. In terms of personal traits, a woman candidate’s gender, age, and family were mentioned most often by female reporters while their appearance and emotions were most frequently noted by male reporters. Chi-square tests only found statistical significance for age ( $\phi=4.273$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and family ( $\phi=7.547$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).<sup>8</sup> As for a man candidate, female reporters were also significantly more likely than male reporters to mention his gender ( $\phi=9.879$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), age ( $\phi=11.298$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and family ( $\phi=14.758$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) but not his emotions. As Table 3 shows, the only personal trait male reporters discussed more often than female reporters was a male candidate’s appearance, but this did not reach significance.

Not only did female reporters pay more attention to personal traits, they also wrote more often about campaign platforms. Female journalists included an issue mention in more than three-quarters of all stories they wrote about women candidates (77.8 percent) while male

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8. One of the nine cells did not have the five-case minimum assumed by the chi-square test for both the age and family variables.

**TABLE 3**

Personal trait depictions of women and men council candidates by sex of reporter during the 2007 Alberta civic election (as a percentage of stories mentioning women or men candidates)

TRAITS	WOMEN CANDIDATES (n=75)					MEN CANDIDATES (n=110)				
	Gender	Age	Appearance	Family	Emotions	Gender	Age	Appearance	Family	Emotions
Female reporter	5.3	9.3 *	0.0	10.7 **	1.3	14.5 **	16.4 ***	0.9	16.4 ***	5.5
Male reporter	2.7	5.3 *	1.3	4.4 **	6.7	6.4 **	7.3 ***	3.6	5.5 ***	2.7

\*p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001

journalists did so in less than half (43.8 percent), a result that was statistically significant ( $\phi=8.120$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Female journalists were also significantly more likely to incorporate men's platforms in most of their stories (80 percent) while male journalists did so only about half the time (52.3 percent;  $\phi=8.812$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). In contrast, male journalists let the candidates speak for themselves more often, quoting women an average of 26.60 words per story and men an average of 49.75 words, while female reporters gave women an average of 24.74 words and men 39 words. The quotation results were not statistically significant.

The personal trait findings raise several questions: Are male journalists more sensitive to feminist arguments that focusing on a woman candidate's personal details is sexist? Do female journalists think they cannot discriminate against other women and so are not careful in how they report? Or is it a matter of gender segregation in newsroom assignments? The content analysis indicates the third question has some validity. Returning to the data, I discovered a clear difference in who wrote which type of election story. Excluding articles without a byline, women reporters authored all of the profiles—where personal details about candidates are normally found—while men reporters penned about two-thirds of the news stories, all of the editorials, and most of the columns. In spite of this sexual division of labour, women journalists still managed to incorporate more information about campaign platforms in their stories than did their male colleagues. Women reporters thus likely did not intentionally try to depict women candidates as trivial but simply wrote the stories assigned to them.

## DISCUSSION

What conclusions can be made about media bias toward women municipal politicians from this investigation of local newspaper coverage of the 2007 Alberta civic election? The most important finding of this study is that media bias is not a *major* obstacle to elected office for aspiring women councillors, even in large cities with a strong media presence. Newspaper coverage of the civic vote contained no instances of the blatant sexism that can be common in press portrayals of women in national politics. Neither daily nor community journalists paid much attention to women council candidates' appearance, age, family, gender, or emotions—even in comparison to men council candidates—and they certainly did not use women's personal characteristics to make negative evaluations about their suitability for



office. No Alberta journalist used a woman's fashion sense to question her leadership skills for municipal office, unlike American journalists, who held up Hillary Clinton's pantsuits as an example of why she was not fit to be president of the United States (Mandziuk, 2008). Women considering a bid for municipal office in Canada can therefore reasonably expect that the media will not trivialize their candidacies by focusing on their bodies at the expense of their minds.

This is not to suggest that media bias does not exist at all in municipal election coverage. While reporters did a decent job of presenting women's campaign platforms to voters, they demonstrated a covert gender bias when they opted to give men more of such coverage. Their decision to more frequently discuss men's policy ideas and to quote men at greater length meant that, although they presented women as serious candidates for municipal office, they subtly portrayed men as the more substantial political contenders. This particular finding mirrors the general trend noted in media coverage of women in national politics (Aday and Devitt, 2005; Heldman et al, 2005; Falk, 2008), suggesting that, regardless of the type of office sought, women still struggle to be taken as seriously as men in the political sphere by the country's journalists.

Conclusions about the role of women journalists in crafting municipal election coverage are less definitive. This study found they exerted an uneven influence on the quality of political reporting at the six newspapers examined. On the negative side, women reporters were more prone to trivialize women politicians by quoting them even less often but using even more personal traits in their stories than men reporters. Yet, on a more positive note, women reporters placed a greater emphasis on campaign platforms for both women and men council candidates than did men reporters. This result hints at the possibility that more diversity in the newsroom might improve the quality and range of political reporting in the long term.

Another important finding of this study is that the structural characteristics of newspapers do matter when it comes to how municipal elections are covered. For example, a large-circulation daily newspaper has the resources to make civic affairs an integral part of its watchdog duties. As well as photographers who can provide engaging visuals, a daily newspaper employs several journalists who can interview candidates for profiles, attend public forums to hear them debate one another, delve into the issues plaguing a ward or community, offer light-hearted snapshots of the campaign, and do other election stories. A frequent publishing schedule and large page counts enable it to then offer this election coverage to voters on a daily basis. In contrast, a community newspaper relies on just one or two reporters to perform these same tasks and to juggle the election with all of the other events and issues they must cover in the community in a given week. A weekly also has fewer pages and less opportunity to publish election stories, giving voters far less information about the civic vote than their daily counterparts.

A community's size and electoral system also complicate a newspaper's ability to cover a municipal election. Unlike big cities, small towns do not have a business sector large enough



to support several media organizations, creating a news monopoly for weekly newspapers that can be detrimental to women candidates if the local paper eschews political coverage in favour of pieces on education, health care, or other topics viewed of more interest to its readers. Big cities can sustain several news outlets, including a daily newspaper, but the ward system common to cities often results in a long list of candidates that can prove difficult for the media to cover. Mid-sized communities that have a small-town slate of candidates but a business sector big enough to support a daily newspaper provide an ideal environment for women candidates seeking substantial media attention. In short, women seeking office in big-city wards suffer a media invisibility only surpassed by those campaigning in small towns, whereas women in small cities can expect a comparatively strong amount of coverage.

## **CONCLUSION**

In summary, this examination of how different types of newspapers covered the 2007 Alberta municipal election broadens the literature on media representation of women politicians by demonstrating that not all types of women politicians receive the same media reception when campaigning for office. Structural factors such as the nature of a community's electoral system and local news industry can help minimize the bias found in civic reporting. Although beyond the scope of this study, the type of office a woman seeks could also influence her press coverage. It is possible that media hostility to women politicians increases in direct proportion to the power or prestige of the position she seeks, regardless of the level of government. Joanna Everitt (2003) hints at this possibility in her research on election reporting in the Maritimes in 1999 and 2000. The only evidence of media bias against women provincial candidates that she found was reserved for the lone female party leader. To test this hypothesis, future research should compare press portrayals of women politicians competing for elite jobs such as mayor with those garnered by women vying for non-elite positions such as councillor.

Yet whatever level of media bias might exist, women contemplating a career in municipal politics should not abandon their candidacies out of a concern they will be trivialized by the media. Journalists generally treat female council candidates fairly. Although some aspects of civic election coverage clearly need to improve, women can navigate many of these obstacles by developing a broad range of media skills and strategies. What they cannot do is permit media bias to prevent them from making a contribution to the communities in which they live.

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