

# Gender Bias

in Conventional and New Media

The Portrayal of US Women Politicians





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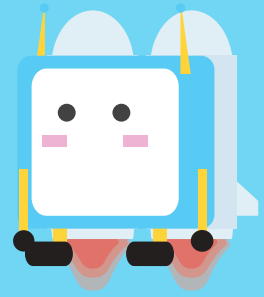
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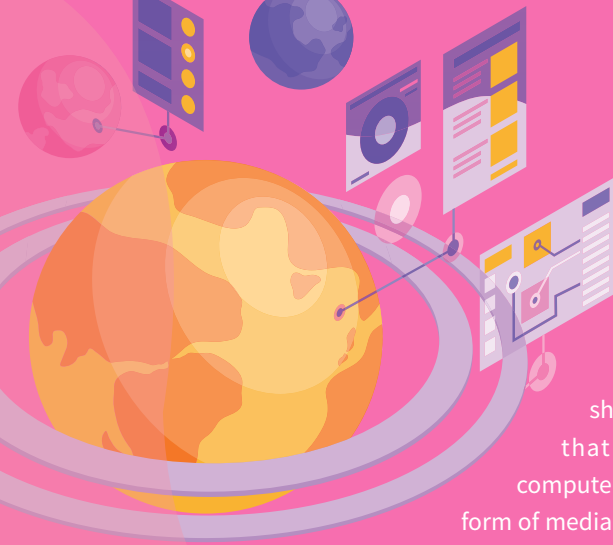
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# Background

The US 2016 Presidential Election has met itself with many controversies over the course of its run. Even before the height of the election itself, the campaign process between the two sides of the house were met with a lot of questions left unanswered even as of now. What separates the US 2016 Presidential election from the rest of elections is the constant use of social media. Social media has seen an increase in usage for political campaigns, not only by the supporters but also by the candidates themselves. Most prominent case of all would be by Donald Trump himself and how his campaign team has drastically changed the scope of political campaigns in the US through social media. Smear campaigns were conducted almost every day from Trump's political campaign and its supporters against the Democrats' running president candidate, Hillary Clinton. Words of disgrace were echoed not only in Trump rallies themselves, but also on the internet, with keywords such as “Crooked Hillary” and “Lock her up!” simply to name a few. This sort of political discourse, which involves smear campaigns, is not something new. However the impact that it has and how it is echoed by new media is something that is new. Hillary Clinton is just one out of many women politicians that suffer from this phenomenon. From this small background, we can clearly see that new media is not to be taken lightly, especially when it comes to politics.



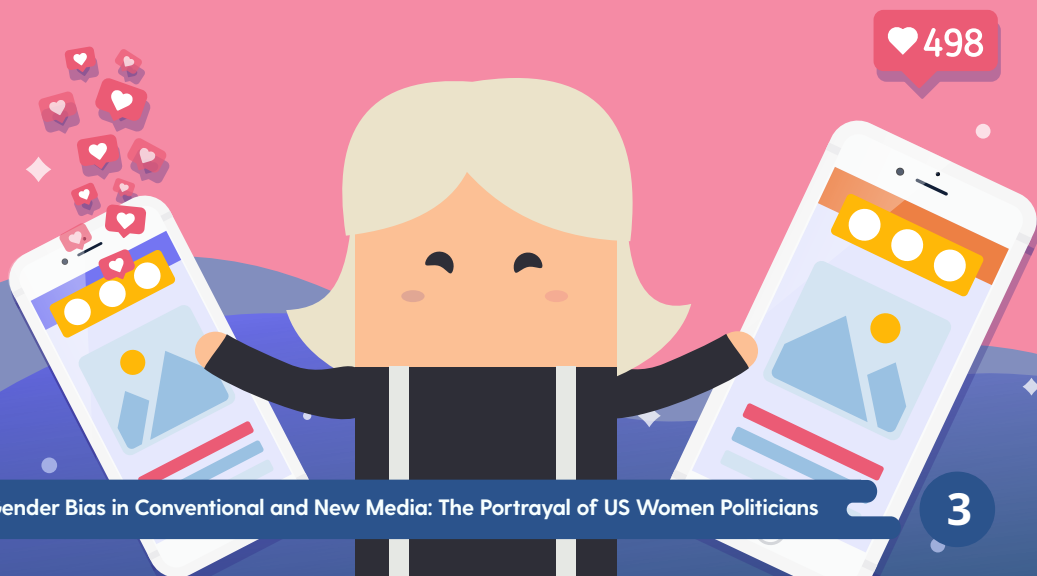
But before we dwell towards discussing how exactly new media portrays women politicians, first we must understand, what is new media? In short, new media are forms of media that are computational and rely on computers for redistribution.<sup>1</sup> Hence, any new form of media that is spread through online means can be considered as new media. New media is often compared to 'old media' such as television, radio, and print media. While old media have rigorous and extensive regulations attached to them, the same cannot be said regarding new media. In today's terms, new media that we all know and are accustomed to would refer to social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc),<sup>2</sup> which we shall use as our definition within this case study.

The objective of this case study is to shed some light on gender bias, especially towards women politicians within the scope of new media. This writing acknowledges that gender bias can manifest everywhere, hence this case study will focus on how this gender bias exists in new media despite gender equality advancement, and how this situation impacts women politicians. More specifically, this case study aims to answer the following questions: How does the characteristics of new media give ground for further sexism against women politicians, and how is this so, despite the potential for new media to become a more emancipatory platform?

To answer this question, we conducted a comprehensive desk research in analysing women politicians, specifically ones from the US, and their portrayal in new media. This case study will also analyse the sociopolitical culture that affects why women politicians in some places are perceived differently than others. The concepts that shall be discussed within this research are gender bias and gendered echo chambers.

# New Media and Women Empowerment

It is often assumed that new media technologies offer a more balanced playing field for women which facilitate better women participation in the public sphere. To some extent, this is true, and is the ideal situation. The media at large has been instrumental to support the movement for women emancipation by focusing on the neglect and marginalization of women in society, which is why accurate and non-stereotypical representation of women is important. The way gender is represented in the media has an influence on how we perceive gender itself,<sup>3</sup> including in the case of women politicians. In this case, technological advancement has given a boost to the media to reach globally in faster time: existing literatures have emphasized the ways new media can facilitate better women empowerment, especially by disseminating values of gender equality. Digital technology facilitated a more inclusive public sphere: through the internet, it is easier for the aged, the disabled, and the discriminated to communicate, to network, and to reach policy makers.<sup>4</sup> Information sharing facilitated by digital media such as dialogues through email, online newsletters, and List Serves between women have also enabled collaboration on a global scale to promote the agenda of gender equality. Examples can be seen from the existence of national and regional various women associations and resource sharing agencies across the globe.



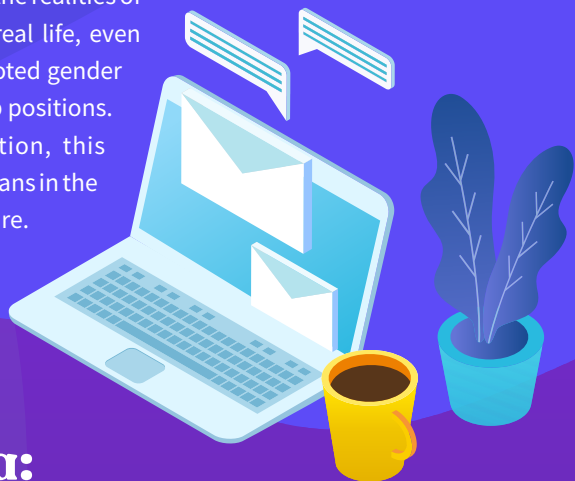


Related to this, the characteristics of social media as a powerful activism tool is also one of the ways it can be utilized to advocate women's rights. For example, forms of online communication such as social media canals act as the fastest way to spread news and advocate gendered grievances since they provide spaces for diverse, bottom-up, and low-cost communication which amplifies women's voices.<sup>5</sup> One notable example is the #MeToo

movement, where women from all backgrounds speak up about their experiences with sexual abuses and harassment in order to seek justice and accountability. Through Twitter hashtags, this movement gained momentum and managed to raise awareness of gendered violence experienced by women. This shows how social media boosts networking and provides activism with a larger audience. Not only because of this technicality, a study by Hosterman et. al also shows how in #MeToo, Twitter contains directive messages as a form of social support that could potentially help victims' recovery processes by others' acknowledgment.<sup>6</sup> This contributes to the idea that new media can lend a specific enclave for women to seek support and positive feedback towards their experiences, a feature that wasn't present in conventional media.

Not only regarding how it can be used to promote gender equality through activism, there has been proof of how social media and new media at large can be a platform where women can have an easier time establishing their presence--as long as they can acquire equal access to digital technology. A study by Qatar Computing Research Institute found that in countries with large gender inequities in offline life, women were more likely to have significant online presences.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, women are more likely to use social media than men across all major platforms except LinkedIn. Although this does not mean that online presence directly translates to better welfare for women, this signifies an improvement nonetheless.

However, social media is merely a tool and the new media as a whole itself is not an empty vacuum; what arises from it depends on what sorts of contents are being created and news being reported. In essence, they play a role in both visibility and reproduction of gender discrimination and also reflect the realities of gender imbalances and gender bias in real life, even more so in issues that involve deeply-rooted gender stereotypes such as women in leadership positions. As will be explained in the next section, this correlates to how and why women politicians in the United States are perceived the way they are.



## **Sexism in Media: What Hasn't Changed**

Although the previous subsection explains that social media may indeed become a powerful tool for women emancipation, the reality is not as easy as it may seem. While new media is a wonderful tool that enables anyone from anywhere in the world to voice their concerns, it acts as a double-edged sword. On one hand it may indeed be true that new media can be used as a tool of emancipation, but on the other hand that all depends on what messages are being spread through the new media. Positive representations regarding women are not the only thing that are spread out and echoed through new media, especially social media, if anything, the exact opposite is just as mainstream. Moreover, despite the existence of more women in the new media, their safety is still often under threat. As an example, women content creators in the new media often receive forms of online abuse and misogynistic violent response through comments and replies.<sup>8</sup>

In old media, it is found that only one in four people we hear, read about, or see in newspapers, on the television and radio news are women, according to the most recent global figures from the 2015 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP).<sup>9</sup> The same cannot be said for new media. What new media has advantage over old media is that new media is the sheer amount of representation. But the problems don't stem from lack of representation, if anything, it is lack of good portrayal. So this is where the dilemma stands, on one hand old media may lack representation of females in news media, but on the other hand new media lacks in proper portrayal of these women politicians. But the underlying similarities between the two is that there is indeed a lack of proper portrayal of women politicians, in general.

This lack of proper portrayal of women politicians can be seen within the United States themselves. We have taken the liberty of selecting a number of women politicians from the US, from both sides of the party, as a means to enlighten how bad the new media portrayal of these women politicians can really be.





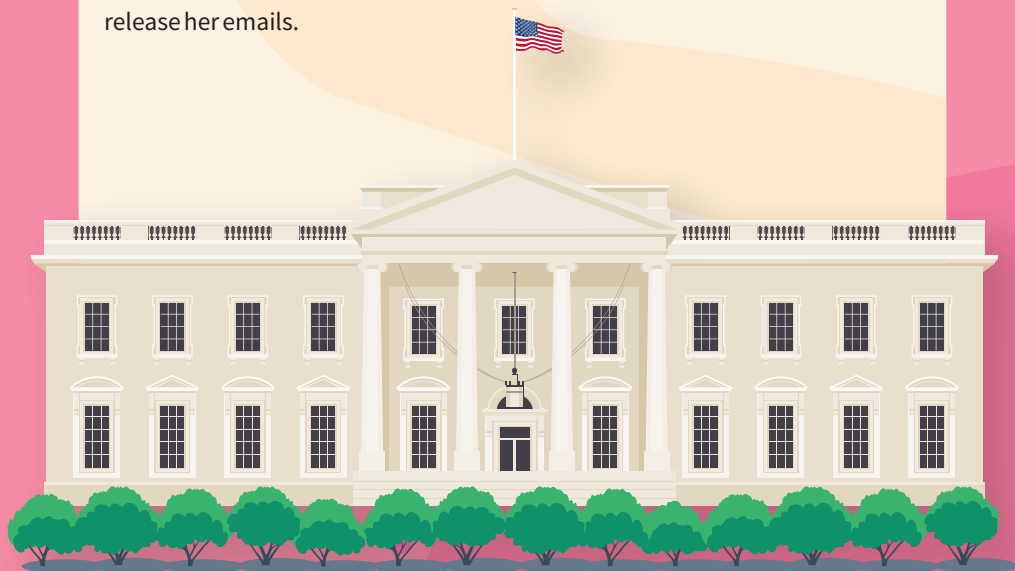


New Media Portrayal Women Politicians

# HILLARY CLINTON

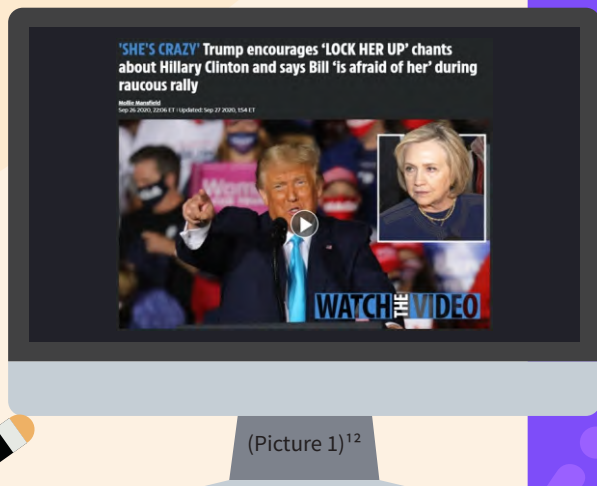
Out of all the women politicians that we have chosen as an example of how bad new media portrayals are, Hillary Clinton may be one of the most well known cases. Not even counting the copious amount of smear campaigns conducted by Trump's election campaign against her, Hillary faced a tremendous amount of bad new media portrayal that, unfortunately, came from both sides of the party. The height of it all was during the 2016 US Presidential election. Many new media portrayals of Hillary focused more on her as an individual rather than her goals and ambitions as a president.

The most notorious case for Hillary was the catchphrase “Crooked Hillary” and “Lock her up!” which became a common chant during Trump rallies.<sup>10</sup> The nickname “Crooked Hillary” was coined by Donald Trump himself as he criticized her suspicious behaviour regarding the usage of secret email servers while she was the US Secretary of State under the Obama administration. Which in turn led to a frivolous scandal that led to people demanding her to release her emails.



Not only that, but over the course of her election campaign she has always been compared to that of her husband with many people saying that she is unfit to become a president. Those reasoning being either because she is a girl and that being a president is a man's job, or because she is not Christian enough to become a president, and best (or in this case worse) of all because she is unhealthy to be running for presidency

Even after all the fiasco of the 2016 US Presidential election, people are still portraying Hillary Clinton under bad spotlight. Most recent case would be how Trump supporters are actually blaming Hillary's fault that her husband, Bill Clinton, cheated on her. The justification being that she has been an unfaithful wife towards her husband which then leads to his debauchery.<sup>11</sup> Due to those facts, most Trump supporters, even till this day, still despise her.





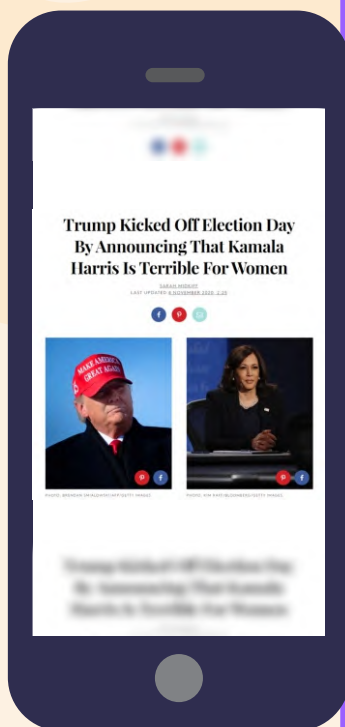
New Media Portrayal Women Politicians

## KAMALA HARRIS

Kamala Harris, much like Hillary, obtained the spotlight of negative portrayal due to the US election. Kamala Harris was nominated by the Democratic Party to become the running VP for Joe Biden in the upcoming 2020 election. Prior to being nominated as VP, Kamala Harris has been rooted very deep within US politics at such a young age. Her early adventure in politics started out as the District Attorney of San Francisco, which eventually led to her role as the US Senator from California.<sup>13</sup>

Over the course of her political career she has shown great interest in ensuring the livelihood of minorities, as she herself claims to be both of African-American and South Asian-American heritage. It is because of this heritage that Kamala Harris has faced constant scrutiny from both sides of the party, where people feel as if her nomination as the running VP was just a form of attention-grabbing scheme to ensure votes from minority voters.

Although her depiction within the new media, especially social media, has not been as extravagant as Hillary's does not mean that it does not happen. If anything, new media has rather been asphyxiated on her heritage, questioning her legitimacy as a Black person, rather than focusing on her herself as the running VP.



(Picture 2)<sup>14</sup>



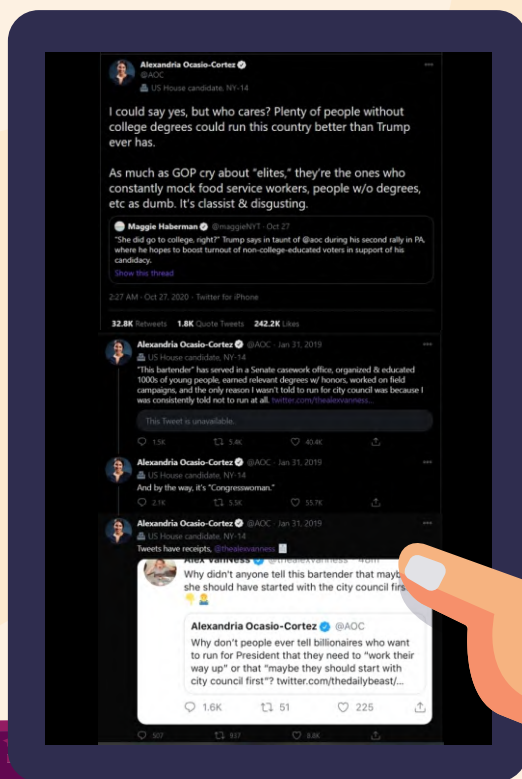
New Media Portrayal Women Politicians

# ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, or most commonly known as AOC, is well-known as one of the youngest women ever to serve in the United States Congress, taking office at the age of 29. It is due to this young age that most of the media coverage that she obtains, if any at that time, have been nothing but scrutiny against her young age and lack of experience. With many people claiming that someone as young as her should not be able to serve as a congresswomen at all, if ever.

But despite all of that, she has been the most vocal when it comes to progressive changes that include, but not limited to, Medicare for All and the Green New Deal.<sup>15</sup> These two progressive changes proposed by AOC is what shook the core for most conservative Republicans, which in then led to her negative portrayal in their media which is then echoed by their supporters. Nonetheless, AOC has taken her status as someone of power and took it as an advantage to address issues regarding sexist behavior and culture not only within politics, but within everyday life. As it can be seen by her action of calling out GOP Representative Ted Yoho, after he verbally assaulted AOC.<sup>16</sup>

One thing to note about AOC is how she is also active on social media, especially on Twitter. AOC uses her platform well as a means of campaign in order to keep in touch with the younger generation. However, using social media as a means of campaign is not as easy as it seems. Due to her progressive nature which tends to strike the living fear out of both sides of the party, she herself has confirmed that she is a constant victim of online death threats. Most of these notorious death threats stems from her Twitter account.<sup>17</sup> Most notable case of scrutiny that she constantly faces is the constant upbringing of her past working as a bartender, as many people point out through social media, is a job not suitable for a congresswomen.



(Picture)<sup>18 19</sup>

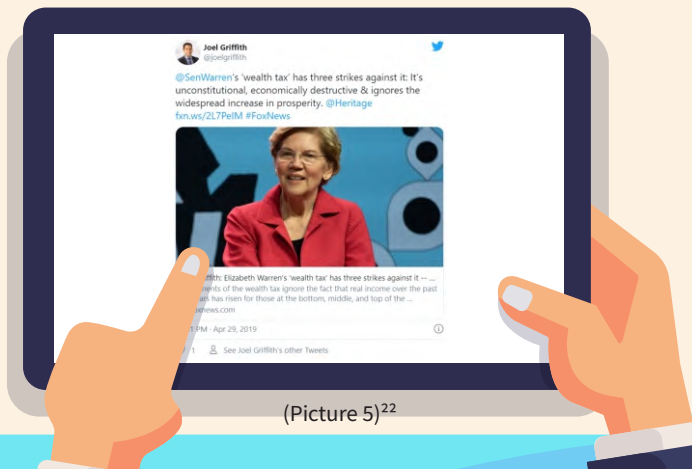


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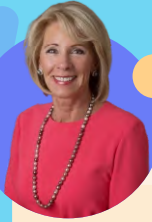
## ELIZABETH WARREN

Elizabeth Warren is a well established US politician that has been well involved within the scope of US politics as early the 90s. She is currently serving as Senator from Massachusetts and for presidency in 2020. She has had a major role in changing the scope of bank predatory schemes and prey on the US citizens as they take away an absorbent amount of tax from the poor. Coming from an economic-law background, Elizabeth Warren has made a name for herself as she proposed the “Two Cents Tax Plan” when she was running for presidency.<sup>20</sup> This tax plan of hers turned the heads of both sides of the party as it, if implemented, would force the taxation of the rich as much as only two cents for each dollar that they make after a certain amount of wealth accumulation.

While her recent popularity came from her presidential race, she is well known as one of the instigators and most vocal in Trump's 2019 impeachment.<sup>21</sup> Much of Elizabeth Warren's negative new media portrayal stems from her progressive 2% tax plans. As her tax plan shook the core of the very wealthy as there's a potential that they have to finally pay their taxes. But sadly this is still far from reality for the US people as she eventually dropped out of the presidential race.



(Picture 5)<sup>22</sup>

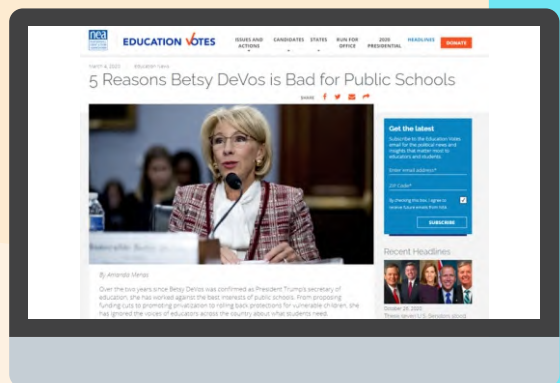


New Media Portrayal Women Politicians

## BETSY DEVOS

Betsy DeVos is the current United States Secretary of Education under the Trump Administration. Although she stems from a Republican background, quite contrasting to the other examples that we have mentioned previously, it does not mean that she is free from the negative portrayals of new media. We may tend to think that for the most part, only the Democratic Party has had such major scrutiny under new media, the same thing is also happening on the other side of the party. But there is a striking contrast between the negative remarks that she receives when compared to her Democratic Party friends. While for the most part they tend to be scrutinized and doubted simply because of their history and background, far from what they actually do, in the case of Betsy DeVos she faced scrutiny because of her job track record, especially during this pandemic.

Acting as Trump's Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos pushed for the reopening of schools disregarding the severity of the pandemic. Explaining that “there has been no significant proof that suggests the reopening of schools would impose dangers towards the children”.<sup>23</sup> Even to the point of threatening withdrawal of school funding for schools that still insist on closing its doors and conducting online classes. This stance regarding the reopening of schools garnered much controversy from both sides of the party. While it is clear as day that the Democratic Party and its supporters would be against such an irrational decision, the same can be seen from the Republican side.

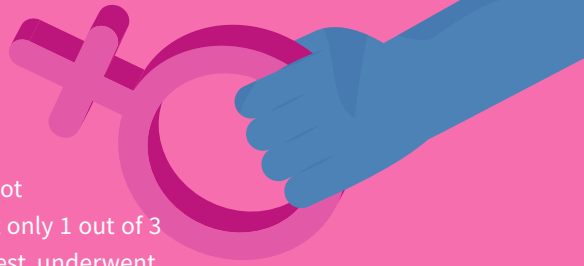


(Picture 6)<sup>24</sup>

From the five examples above we can see how old media and new media can tend to frame these strong female politicians. A rather interesting pattern to note is that, rather than focusing on what they have established, most of the negative new media portrayals stems from their background and themselves as a person, rather than what it is that they have done. Most notably is how the media tends to put a shift of focus in regards to their personal domestic lives, compared to male politicians. Due to that we can see that in the scope of US politics, old and new media tends to attribute specific values to them such as portraying them as crooked women, emotional, incompetent, irrational, inexperienced, and many more.

However, not all portrayals of women politicians are that way. An example of this would be Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand. Jacinda Ardern, compared to US women politicians who are portrayed negatively by the media, is portrayed in a rather positive light by old and new media in New Zealand. In contrast, Jacinda Ardern is portrayed as a loving, caring, and motherly figure woman politician.<sup>25</sup> This gap in portrayals further proves how the context of socio-political environment affects how women politicians are portrayed. Although patriarchy exists in all parts of the world, the political culture of a country and its background affect how women politicians are portrayed. In the case of United States, women are far more likely than men to see structural barriers and uneven expectations holding women back from these positions. About 7 in 10 women say a major reason why women are underrepresented in top positions in politics is that they have to do more to prove themselves.<sup>26</sup>





Moreover, the case of New Zealand is not the rule, it is the outlier. It is found that only 1 out of 3 women president are elected; the rest underwent procedures such as succeeding presidents, or appointed to the presidency to serve on a temporary basis. A common pathway to more powerful positions for women in Asia and Latin America is through being the wife or daughter of a politically prominent man. Whereas in United States, one factor that contributes to the lack of women president includes the fact that women are less likely than men to run for office, due to perceptions of sexism, limited political recruitment and underestimation of their qualifications. They continue to encounter more negative perceptions from the public, political elites and the mass media regarding their leadership capabilities and competence, compared to their male counterparts.<sup>27</sup>

The next question: why is it that the new media, which basically encompasses almost all axis within the political spectrum, ends up being one of the means of media that is the most sexist, misogynistic, and discriminative towards women politicians? One could argue that there is indeed a form of bias towards depicting these women in these particular ways. This will be explained in the next section, which correlates to the reasoning of how and why women politicians are depicted the way they are.





## Explaining Gender Bias towards Women Politicians

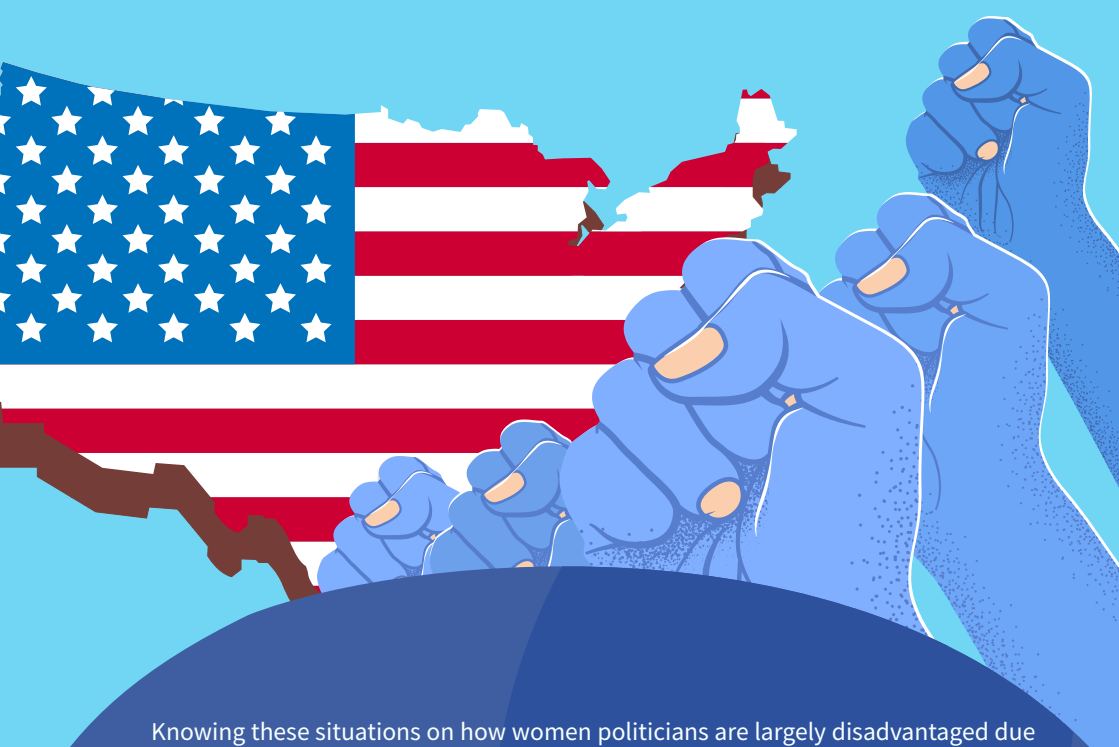
From the case of US women politicians' coverage in new media, there are some takeaways that we can take, mainly proving how despite the ideally promising changes brought by new media technologies, the issue of sexism and misogyny still remains. This has to do not only with patriarchal culture, but also specifically because of how those things manifest in media portrayal of political leadership. The issue of this portrayal is important since the media is the main source of political information for many if not most people, since they are rarely able to meet politicians directly so their perception relies on what the media says about politicians and electoral candidates. In the United States, social media is the second most popular source of election news.<sup>28</sup> Hence, more media coverage of leadership qualities can mean more electability and other positive electoral consequences, and that the remaining problem of how women politicians are perceived in the media may also bear a practical impact which is the underrepresentation of women in politics. 77 per cent of the world's parliamentarians are male, and only two out of 193 parliaments comprise at least 50 per cent women, with Rwanda and Bolivia.<sup>29</sup>

Gender stereotypes that are applied towards politicians are more specific than the everyday stereotypes, they are attributed to leadership qualities<sup>30</sup>. For example, leaders are seen as similar to men, but different from women. Leaders are also seen as more masculine than feminine<sup>31</sup>: traits such as tough, independent, competitive, ambitious, objective, unemotional, strong leader, assertive, knowledgeable, effective are considered 'male', while the designated 'female' traits include passive, dependent, non-competitive, gentle, weak leader, emotional, compassionate, kind, attractive, honest, altruistic and sometimes unintelligent or uninformed<sup>32</sup>. This shows how female politicians have been disadvantaged from the start, with or without the new media technologies. The stereotypical traits people ascribe to women do not overlap with the traits they assign to female politicians, while the male stereotype and the male politician stereotype largely coincide. For example, while people associate women with integrity and related characteristics such as honesty and decency, they do not think female politicians typically score high on integrity.<sup>33</sup> This can be attributed to how political life is seen as a public realm, but women belong in the domestic realm--hence there are different expectations being ascribed to them as opposed to men who are already deemed fitting to be in the public realm.



Using the Dutch election as a study case, Aaldering and Van Der Pas found that male party leaders are discussed more often (4.54%) in terms of their political craftsmanship and vigour than female party leaders (3.01%), and received more reporting based on these traits.<sup>34</sup> In the media, the more evaluative news coverage for male politicians puts female politicians at an electoral disadvantage. Women are more prone to be criticized based on looks and behaviors online. Coverage of women that is misogynistic and sexist, including in regards to women politicians—having their personal lives and looks dissected the way male politicians aren't<sup>35</sup>. Based on the examination of 37 years of coverage at one The Globe and Mail newspaper (conventional media), it is found that journalists tend to place greater emphasis on women's bodies and personal lives than they did on men's, and that this didn't change over the 37 years<sup>36</sup>.

Aaldering also hypothesizes that these patterns will be more emphasized in United States, where politics is more candidate-centered as opposed to parties-centered like in the case of Netherlands<sup>37</sup>. The polarizing bipartisan culture is one of the factors that contribute to the status quo in the United States, further emphasized by echo chambers done by new media. To illustrate, Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents are more than twice as likely as Republicans and Republican-leaning individuals to say there are too few women in high political offices (79% vs. 33%)<sup>38</sup>. Hence, if a woman candidate from Democrats runs in the election, it is highly likely that she will receive backlash from Republicans, who were already more prejudiced from the start, and this prejudice is replicated since they tend to all consume similar sources of news in the echo chamber.



Knowing these situations on how women politicians are largely disadvantaged due to gender bias and negative connotation of women leaders, this section then analyzes how new media accelerates the spread and internalization of biased media coverage of said women politicians through several mechanisms and characteristics. This is important to be discussed because despite the potentials of new media to better empower gender equality, in 2015, The Global Media Monitoring Project found “persistent and emerging gaps in gender portrayal and representation in not only traditional (print and broadcast) media, but in new electronic media forms” as well<sup>39</sup>.

Whether or not new media is able to become a gender-equal platform to portray women politicians is also affected by who is making the news. Regarding this, the dynamics of political journalists in new media, which significantly makes up political communication, is still largely sexist. Specifically about political journalism, it involves what is termed “pack journalism,” characterized by intrusive reporting, insularity, and homogeneous, excessive coverage<sup>40</sup>. Because of this, the process of journalistic legitimization between journalists is important. Twitter is one of the most popular new media platforms, including for the purpose of political journalism. It plays a role in the legitimization of journalists, and how one is regarded on Twitter reflects the position of dominance or subordination one has in the field<sup>41</sup>.



A research by Usher found that Twitter reflects existing gender disparities in political/government journalism and might even amplify them. Male journalists “win” on Twitter across most measures because they have larger social capital and larger pool to seek validation since men appear almost to self-segregate while not treating women journalists the same. On average, beltway journalists (journalists who cover political and federal 'high politics' issues) are more likely to follow male

journalists than female journalists: male journalists follow male journalists more, but female journalists also follow male journalists more.<sup>42</sup> This pattern also shows up in retweets--and these lead to how political coverage by male journalists are more widely distributed and accessed. Despite the fact that women are more likely to use social media, men are retweeted almost twice as often as women<sup>43</sup>.

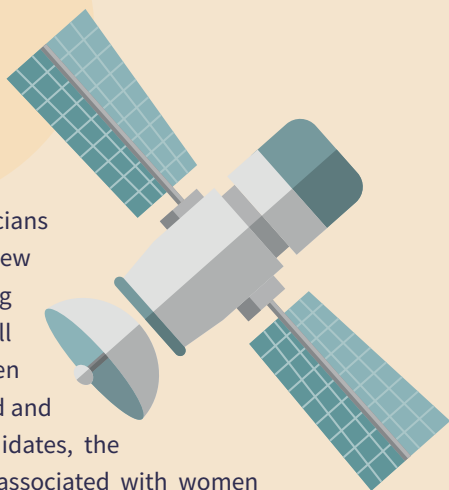
Inadvertently, this creates a gendered echo chamber due to Twitter mechanism. Although this does not directly correlate to women politicians' media portrayal, it does explain how even the workings of political journalism, which creates those media portrayals, are rife with gender bias. Given Twitter's centrality in political communication, understanding gender disparities on Twitter that exist matters<sup>44</sup>. Without saying that it is the only mechanism of abundant sexist media coverage of women politicians, to some extent, this helps explain why such coverage could reach a large audience and might influence the way these women politicians are perceived.



# Conclusion

From the new media portrayal of women politicians in the US, it can be concluded that despite the new tools and technologies that are expected to bring radical change to better gender equality, it still shows similar problems to what have already been happening within the old media: male-dominated and sexist. Specifically in the case of political candidates, the gender bias in politics and the characteristics associated with women contribute to a specific gender bias that disadvantages women politicians compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, with features that are exclusive to new media, such as social media algorithms and the resulting echo chamber, this gender bias is further reproduced in a quicker pace. Even if new media has the potential to be better than old media, which is to give an equal position for both genders in terms of portrayal, we must also consider that women continue to become victims of harassment and misogyny online, not excluding women politicians who receive a very close scrutiny to the extent of their personal lives compared to male politicians. While new media has become a useful tool to advocate for women issues because of people's participation in supporting women emancipation, on the other hand there are those who do the opposite, such as by creating a gender-bias driven journalism towards women.

Hence, acknowledging these issues, it is safe to assume that the way to provide a better representation of women in the media cannot be done simply by changing the tools of the media, but there must be a conscious effort to denounce sexism, and demanding fair coverages and narratives of women politicians and other women subjects. On this front, new media brings about some characteristics that can facilitate demands of accountability in journalism: people can call out misogynist behavior better compared to the case of conventional media because of the nature of new media itself, interactivity and two-way communication<sup>45</sup>, and because women and other typically disadvantaged communities have easier access to it.



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