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Women of Color and the Right to Representation: What the Media Isn't Telling You

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There has been a long-standing tradition of the media's failure to represent women of color in politics. This lack of intersectional media coverage leads to drastic consequences within the sociopolitical environment and the representation that women of color ultimately receive. The unjust neglect and racist practices directed towards women of color in turn allows similar views to be projected onto its audience. It is through these specific targeted media practices that women of color in politics are often viewed differently than their fellow white candidates, of both men and women. Further, such practices and differential treatment leads to greater election results for said white candidates, while women of color in politics continue to grapple with the treacherous path to political representation. Such consequential media practices must be put to an end in order to allow women of color in politics the proper representation and chance at elections that such an already underrepresented group is deserving of, as a means to achieve true social and democratic justice.

The issue of representation begins with the utter lack thereof. Women of color in politics receive significantly less media coverage overall and suffer the consequences in their elections as a result. Part of this lack of representation is rooted

within the lack of representation of women as politicians in general in the media. For example, "women candidates who run for the U.S. Senate seats receive less coverage than men."¹ While this is devastating to the election of women candidates, it is especially difficult for women of color. A study was conducted to examine media practices, such as lack of coverage and how it impacts women of color as political candidates, specifically observing the impact on African American and Latina women. This study found both minority groups faced less coverage claiming that "garnering frequent media coverage for their activities and messages"² was "the primary challenge"³ for African American women candidates.

The study similarly found that "Latinas received less frequent coverage from their local papers than other congresswomen."⁴ This remains problematic, as it further ensures the success of white women over women of color, which in turn leads to a lack of true representation in decision making positions. The more coverage a candidate receives, the more the general public will know about said candidate and be more willing to vote for them simply by matter of name recognition. As such, when "on average, Anglo women in this sample received twenty-two articles per representative,

¹ Lisa Eargle, Ashraf Esmail, and Jas Sullivan, "Voting the Issues or Voting the Demographics? The Media's Construction of Political Candidates Credibility," *Race, Gender & Class Journal* 15, no.3 (2008): 8. Accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/voting-issues-demographics-media-s-construction/docview/218859354/se-2?accountid=27700>.

² Sarah Gershon, "Media Coverage of Minority Congresswomen and Voter Evaluations: Evidence from an Online Experimental Survey," *Political Research Quarterly*, 66, no. 3 (2012): 710, Doi: 10.1177/1065912912467851.

³ Gershon, "Media Coverage of Minority Congresswomen," 710.

⁴ Gershon, "Media Coverage of Minority Congresswomen," 710.

compared with an average of almost eleven for African American women and five for Latinas”⁵ it becomes apparent as to why so few women of color occupy so few influential decision-making positions. Some may argue that this lack of coverage has little to do with race or ethnicity, but is rather based on the election, which the individual is running for, as it has been asserted that “minority women, many of whom represent minority-majority districts, may be more likely to run in non competitive general election races, drawing less campaign coverage and fewer editorial endorsements,”⁶ for these races tend to draw less attention in general. While this may be the case, one may reason that such a lack of coverage and lack of respect for women of color candidates within the media leads said women to run in such elections where they know they can make the most change without being subject to such scrutiny simply for the immutable traits that make them who they are. In order to ensure that this lack of representation is addressed, it is important that the media’s frequency in coverage of women of color in politics is adjusted to be equal to that of Anglo women and men.

Framing, too, plays an essential role in the political outcomes for women of color candidates. This is especially true in regards to the tone that the media utilizes when speaking about and to women of color in political contexts, for it is typically dominated with negativity. This is imperative in the influence that such negativity can have, for it is “concluded that the type of frames shaped people's feelings and opinions about the subject matter.”⁷

⁵ Gershon, “Media Coverage of Minority Congresswomen,” 706.

⁶ Gershon, “Media Coverage of Minority Congresswomen,” 704.

⁷ Eargle, et al., “Voting the Issues,” 6.

When analyzing why the media has such an impact, it may be seen that media is oftentimes the general population's main source of information on candidates, and as such “the manner in which the media frames a political candidate may make or break a candidate's bid for elected office.”⁸ In other words, the way in which material is presented on such candidates within the media shapes the way that the public will view said candidates. Unfortunately, under the current system, “the coverage women do receive is more negative and emphasizes their un-likelihood to win.”⁹ Such an emphasis ensures the disproportionate representation both in regards to gender and race within elected positions shall remain intact. The legitimacy of such a claim is only strengthened by the way in which media outlets have been found to receive such powerful women, for it has been seen that “in particular, women receive less issue attention than men and, and the media is more receptive to men's messages.”¹⁰ A continuous focus on this negativity within these minorities’ candidacies will further promote the anglo normative environment of the current political systems in place. Acknowledging this negativity’s presence and the media’s strategic methods of excluding women of color in the political realm is necessary in readjusting the ideology of the general public in regards to elected positions and cultural behaviors.

In the few circumstances that women of color in politics are represented within the media, they are often treated as a token body, used to represent or symbolize the entirety of a racial or ethnic population. This use of women of color is performative, as it

⁸ Wanda Parham-Payne, *The Intersection of Race and Gender in National Politics* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 65.

⁹ Eargle, et al., “Voting the Issues,” 8.

¹⁰ Eargle, et al., “Voting the Issues,” 8.

seeks to show diversity and inclusion without taking any action to make true changes. This can oftentimes be seen in what is known as “the ‘diversity photo,’”¹¹ which places “only one woman of color in the photo to signal the inclusiveness of minorities.”¹² While some would argue the presence of even one woman of color placed in such a photo is progress, it must be noted that in juxtaposition to the multitude of white men the concepts of diversity and inclusion appear much farther out of reach. This can further be emphasized, as the placement of one woman of color within the photo reinforces the idea that all women of color are the same, and rather rejects sociocultural differences amongst varying racial and ethnic identities. In other words, claiming a woman of one particular race or ethnicity to represent all women of varying minority racial or ethnic identities, promotes a false narrative.

Tonia Bui, an Asian woman who worked as the communications director on a state legislative race in Virginia, recalls the way in which her identity as a woman of color took priority, for her “presence in these spaces caused [her] Asian ethnicity to take precedence over [her] leadership duties on the campaign.”¹³ Once again, said women are utilized to promote others’ agendas in a degrading and dehumanizing way. Women, like Bui, are objectified as a tool to accomplish symbolic goals, rather than utilized for the many skills and knowledge they bring to the table. With an understanding of this use of tokenism within

the media realm, it becomes apparent that changes must be made to ensure women of color are not only represented within the media, but also treated as humans capable of great things.

The media’s history of excluding women and people of color extends into the stereotypes placed upon such groups, which attempt to deem such candidates as unqualified and further contribute to the way said populations are negatively represented within the media. This has largely impacted women specifically, as their entrance into the sociopolitical sphere began just over a century ago through their ability to vote. Despite this entrance, women have still faced a number of limitations and stereotypes that have sought to keep them out of the world of politics. Such practices are still utilized today by the media to invalidate the capabilities of women candidates, as they often choose to focus “on personal traits, such as appearance or family, at the expense of political experience and qualifications,”¹⁴ which in turn may leave audiences feeling such candidates are unqualified or incapable of such leadership. Such views may in turn lead to a lack of support for women candidates. The subject matter too plays a role in how the media perceives said candidates, for “when women focus on those issues that are largely perceived as ‘male issues’, including defense and economy, then they are portrayed and subsequently perceived as attempting to be masculine resulting in poor reception among the voter

¹¹ Tonia Bui, “Shaping the Mainstream as an Asian American Woman: Politics Within Politics,” *Asian American Policy Review* 24 (2013-2014): 28. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/shaping-mainstream-as-asian-american-woman/docview/1786882308/se-2?accountid=27700>.

¹² Bui, “Shaping the Mainstream,” 28.

¹³ Bui, “Shaping the Mainstream,” 27.

¹⁴ Jennifer C. Lucas, “Gender and Race in Congressional National News Media Appearances in 2008,” *Politics & Gender* 13, no. 4 (2017): 569-596. Accessed February 22, 2022, <https://10.1017/S1743923X16000623>.

population.”¹⁵ Meanwhile “when women are portrayed as focusing on ‘women’s issues’ such as child care, education, healthcare, they are then portrayed and perceived as competent by the media.”¹⁶ In labeling issues as masculine or feminine, the media excludes women from taking positions on many issues that impact their potential constituencies without the fear of other political criticisms, which again may contribute to the audience’s opinion that they are unqualified for office, possibly even allowing for generalizations surrounding gender as well, which only excludes women from politics further. People of color often find themselves faced with similar stereotypes surrounding their qualifications as well. For example, the Washington Post once ran a headline, which read “Foreign-Born Candidates Lose to Republicans in Virginia But Are Optimistic About the Future.”¹⁷ At first glance, the title may not appear to be too problematic, that is until it is found that the subject matter does not align with that of the headline, for the article talks of men Nguyen, Latino, and Pakistani candidates who were both Virginians and U.S. citizens, yet use of the words “foreign-born” insinuate just the opposite. Such wording reinforces stereotypes that those of racial and ethnic identities differing from white are foreign, whereas those who identify as white are automatically considered citizens. This is further problematic, as the headline appears to connect the term “foreign-born” as the reason for these candidate’s losses.¹⁸ In labeling and stereotyping such candidates, the media promotes an ideology in which

finds “certain populations are not American citizens, and therefore they are not qualified to serve in politics”;¹⁹ certain populations, which only consist of people of color. Both women and people of color face this stereotype, which proclaims them “unqualified” for leadership, though for different reasons. Regardless, both populations’ depictions within the media as such continue to disadvantage their ability to obtain representation through election, as how should any “unqualified” person find themselves in a position, which others find them incapable of taking on? Some may make the argument that such groups are indeed unqualified, for in some circumstances even they themselves believe this to be true, as when surveyed “36% of the men surveyed consider themselves ‘very qualified’ to run for office, only 20% of women feel that way. By contrast, women are three times as likely as men (24% compared to 8%) to rate themselves as ‘not at all qualified’ to run.”²⁰ While this information may be true, one must also acknowledge the consistent messaging directed towards women that they are incapable, for when an individual is repeatedly told something, they themselves may begin to believe it as well. As such, this measurement of qualification cannot be used as a standard of which candidates’ capabilities may be based upon, especially considering that “potential candidates’ self-perceptions are consistent with messages they receive—or don’t—about running for office.”²¹ Such stereotypes and perceptions become an even greater feat when both identities as a woman and person of color intersect. Changes must be

¹⁵ Parham-Payne, *The Intersection of Race*, 66.

¹⁶ Parham-Payne, *The Intersection of Race*, 66.

¹⁷ Bui, “Shaping the Mainstream,” 28.

¹⁸ Bui, “Shaping the Mainstream,” 28.

¹⁹ Bui, “Shaping the Mainstream,” 29.

²⁰ Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox, “Running for office is still for men— some data on the ‘Ambition

Gap,” Brookings Institution, 2022, Accessed April 27, 2022.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2022/02/08/running-for-office-is-still-for-men-some-data-on-the-ambition-gap/>.

²¹ Lawless, “Running for office.”

made to ensure both populations are accurately represented for all of their capabilities, rather than the stereotypes, which continue to hold them back, in order to allow for an equal chance at obtaining representation in all positions of power.

In a world dominated by white men, all other racial and ethnic identities are subject to becoming “minorities” in the eyes of the media. In other words, all racial or ethnic identities, with the exception of white, become known as the collective “other.” In creating this separate status, the media forces the responsibility of informing the majority about the minority on to the “other.” Following in this tradition, the media can at times view women of color’s candidacies for public office with a specific lens, which “focuses on their race/gender and the novelty of their candidacy.”²² This is especially true “for minority women because of the ‘double barrier’ of race and gender.”²³ Their candidacies are often limited to the scope of their racial or ethnic identity along with their gender identity. This limit placed upon these women by the media, further contributes to the ideology that they are incapable of serving in leadership roles. Rather, such practices emphasize their “otherness by focusing on the difference from the perceived norm of white and male.”²⁴ In other words, the intersectional identities of women of color in politics are often viewed as the very qualifiers, which allow these individuals to lead. Their identities are seen as the reason for their place in politics, rather than their skills and knowledge that qualify them. This is further asserted through what is known as “identity-based constituency”²⁵ or “issue spokespersonship.”²⁶ In practice, such concepts lead others to “seek out

congresswomen as sources on women’s issues or candidates, or black members as sources to speak about black candidates or issues, because they are perceived as authoritative voices with identity-based sources of credibility.”²⁷ While in some ways, these concepts may appear beneficial, as they rely on real people’s experiences rather than misconstrued stereotypes held by others, many issues still remain. One such issue includes how such concepts reinforce the idea that an individual is capable of speaking on behalf of an entire population; a population, which must be noted often includes individuals with varying identities and experiences, which cannot be summed up under one categorical term, but too often face such labels. These limitations placed upon women of color specifically in this unique intersectional way, leads to a disadvantaged chance at election to public office, and must be altered in order to create a more just and representative body in power.

The intersectional identities of women of color in politics are even further complicated by other identities at times that too can hold them back from achieving political and electoral victories. This is especially true for the variety of sexual orientations and gender expressions, which fall under the term LGBT and its many varieties, that people may identify with. This adds a layer of intersectional identity to that of the already complex identity as a woman of color, as the LGBT identity alone raises concerns in the media’s representation of political candidates. Through a number of interviews of political candidates identifying as LGBT, it was found that “not surprisingly most candidates indicated that the media did not print or air more than a few reports on

²² Lucas, “Gender and Race in Congressional,” 570.

²³ Lucas, “Gender and Race in Congressional,” 571.

²⁴ Lucas, “Gender and Race in Congressional,” 571.

²⁵ Lucas, “Gender and Race in Congressional,” 572.

²⁶ Lucas, “Gender and Race in Congressional,” 572.

²⁷ Lucas, “Gender and Race in Congressional,” 572.

their race,”²⁸ once more establishing a lack of coverage of marginalized populations.

Some may argue that said individuals’ sexual orientation as LGBT had little to do with the amount or type of coverage they received, for some candidates reported that while “sexual orientation was mentioned in media reports in virtually all races, it was not usually the main focus of coverage,”²⁹ which largely differs from the experiences of women of color who have often had their race and gender encompass the entirety of their media coverage’s focus. These experiences must be taken lightly though, as others reported that when receiving any coverage, it was typically “to focus on the fact that one or more candidates in the race were openly gay or lesbian,”³⁰ again proving the media’s use of marginalized populations only as “experts” in identity-based subject matter. This discrepancy in experiences surrounding the focus of such coverage, while confusing, must be evaluated from its worst experiences, for while the efforts of certain media sources may be improving, others continue to treat such minority candidates with a level of dehumanizing disrespect that one must look to these experiences to represent the whole in order to address the true issues at heart. This remains especially true in the context of other reported media practices, such as how the coverage that was provided usually “did portray openly LGBT candidates in a negative light.”³¹ Such negativity appears to remain the same as that used in covering women of color in politics in the media. Further, such negativity raises the question of why said individuals were treated as such other than as a result of their

identity as LGBT. Had these candidates not identified with the label LGBT, would they have faced similar negativity in the framing of their coverage? They likely would not have, which leads one to find the media practices surrounding LGBT political candidates to be just as discriminatory as those inflicted upon women of color in the same position, for overall the LGBT population in politics faces similar issues of representation within the media as that of women of color, for they encounter difficulties with negative framing, limited identity-based subject matter, as well as general struggles to obtain any coverage at all. As such, women of color who may also identify with one or multiple of the many identities, which fall under the umbrella of LGBT, may face even greater challenges to obtaining proper coverage to promote their candidacy. Nonetheless, this only serves as more reason to make changes to the media practices currently used to exclude already marginalized populations from political representation.

After evaluating the practices, which the media employs in its representation of women of color in politics, it may be seen that such practices have quite a consequential impact on elections. The value the media plays in aiding candidates with their campaigns for election must not be forgotten, as both “women and minorities, can benefit from national media coverage because it raises their media profile, enabling them to be heard on national issues, helps them gain power within their caucus, and helps to advance their agenda.”³² Together, these forms of political aid allow candidates a better chance

²⁸ Donald Haider-Markel, “See How They Run: Voter Preferences and Candidates’ Experiences with the Role of Sexual Orientation in State Elections,” *Out and Running: Gay and Lesbian Candidates, Elections, and Policy Representation* (Georgetown University Press, 2010), 58.

²⁹ Haider-Markel, “See How They Run,” 58-59.

³⁰ Haider-Markel, “See How They Run,” 57.

³¹ Haider-Markel, “See How They Run,” 59.

³² Lucas, “Gender and Race in Congressional,” 571.

at being elected, but once more this relies on the media's representation of said candidates; a representation that has repeatedly been inadequate in providing women of color in politics the proper media coverage necessary to give them a fair chance at election. Many individuals utilize the media as "the primary source from which members of the general citizenry access any and all information regarding political candidates,"³³ and as such the ways in which it represents candidates can be influential in determining election outcomes. Some individuals may dispute such a statement though, for they find that "for most Americans, exposure to different content and ideas on social media has not caused them to change their opinions,"³⁴ and rather find that only "a small share of the public – 14% – say they have changed their views about a political or social issue in the past year because of something they saw on social media"³⁵. Regardless of the validity of such data, it is important to note that "while Americans who haven't changed their views put less personal importance in social media, majorities see these platforms as helping give voice to underrepresented groups."³⁶ As such, the media may be incapable of changing or influencing all viewers' opinions, it may be understood that even the ability to alter a few viewers' opinions may make a difference in election results, and in turn in the representation of minorities, such as women of color in office. This use of the media is especially crucial in the the months leading up to election day, where it was found in a study on the media's impact on

³³ Parham-Payne, *The Intersection of Race*, 65.

³⁴ Kristen Bialik, "14% of Americans changed their mind about an issue because they saw something on social media," Pew Research Center, 2022, Accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/15/14-of-americans-have-changed-their-mind-about-an-issue-because-of-something-they-saw-on-social-media/>.

³⁵ Bialik, "14% of Americans changed"

the 2006 election, that when audiences were presented with African American congresswomen's coverage, there was "no significant impact on subjects' desires to vote for the representative, indicating"³⁷ that the "coverage did not lead to substantially different levels of support among voters than the coverage of Anglo women".³⁸ Meanwhile, the same study found that when presented Latina congresswomen's coverage, the effect was "negative and significant, decreasing subjects' willingness to vote for the representative."³⁹ This data collected clearly shows that the bias presented within the media toward Latinas in politics played a role in shaping public opinion. This was not the only electoral factor influenced though, as the study too found a relationship between media coverage and political endorsements, for Anglo and African American congresswomen were found to be "endorsed at roughly the same rate (53% and 50% respectively). In contrast, less than 15 percent of the Latina incumbents in the House in 2006 received the endorsement of their local paper."⁴⁰ Such endorsements further provide candidates with support and promotion, meaning that any candidate without or with lower rates of endorsement could be disadvantaged to others who maintain such endorsements; others, which as found in by the study tend to be Anglo or African American, rather than Latina.

In further analyzing all of these results, one must review the practices applied to both identity-based groups

³⁶ Bialik, "14% of Americans changed"

³⁷ Gershon, "Media Coverage of Minority Congresswomen," 709.

³⁸ Gershon, "Media Coverage of Minority Congresswomen," 709.

³⁹ Gershon, "Media Coverage of Minority Congresswomen," 709.

⁴⁰ Gershon, "Media Coverage of Minority Congresswomen," 707.

separately and together, for while many media practices impact both groups, some practices had a greater impact on the Latina population. With this in mind, it must be noted that while African American women were able to overcome some of the obstacles enacted by the media, Latinas faced many more issues with media practices, as found by this same study. As such, it makes sense that Latinas faced greater consequences in their political and electoral support. Regardless, the barriers holding back all women of color in politics, but especially Latinas, is essential in providing greater access to public office and establishing true representation within the nation's governing bodies.

In conclusion, the media has too long prevented the political and electoral success of women of color in politics. Both in the systemic and practical applications, the media has disadvantaged women of color's

chances in being elected, for the continual focus on anglo men and women has further marginalized women of color and the populations, which they seek to represent. The media's coverage and lack thereof has forced said candidates to the sidelines in a number of electoral races, as they fight to remain in the running. Action must be taken in order to interrupt these systemically racist and sexist practices. Without action, the majority of the nation's governing and representative bodies will continue to consist of white men, despite the fact that they oftentimes are not representative of the populations, which they serve. As such, media practices must be changed in order to allow for greater advancement in the election of women of color and, as a result, a more representative governing body capable of truly meeting the needs of its constituents.

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