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**Looking for Sex in All the Wrong Places:  
Press Coverage of Gubernatorial Candidates, 1990 – 1997**

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**Abstract:** The rapidly changing status of women in society ensures that gender bias is a moving target for scholars. This paper compares conventional measures of differential press treatment of women and men with more subtle gender distinctions, and then assesses their impact on election outcomes for gubernatorial candidates. Based on fine-grained coding of more than 1,300 newspaper articles for 27 gubernatorial races between 1990 and 1997 in which a female candidate held a major party nomination, the analysis reveals that gender stereotypes in press coverage persist, but not as scholars typically define them. Men are more likely than women to receive attention to their actions, personal traits, and backgrounds. In addition, men fare better than women by roughly 11 percentage points of the two-party vote, even after accounting for newspaper content, the context of the campaign, and the characteristics of the state and newspaper. The fact that sex plays a large role in depressing the vote for female gubernatorial candidates provides compelling evidence of the need to look for the roots of gender disparities in new places.

The title of this paper was sparked by Johnny Lee's country and western song, "Looking for Love in all the Wrong Places." We thank Dartmouth students Jacqueline Rose and James Pfadenhauer for data collection, Dick Winters for sharing variables on state political characteristics, and Michael Herron and Dean Lacy, whose careful responses to many methodological questions saved us from some, if not all, errors.

**Looking for Sex in All the Wrong Places:  
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The rapidly changing status of women in society ensures that gender bias is a moving target for scholars. As women have become more visible in electoral politics, the challenges of identifying potential sources of bias have grown more complex. The bad old days are over; a male candidate cannot win an election simply by running an ad featuring his opponent's husband urging, "Coya, come home."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, overt prejudice on the part of voters has disappeared, at least in legislative elections, once scholars account for incumbency, district demographics, and candidate quality (Dolan 2004; Smith and Fox 2001; Cook 1998; Seltzer, Newman and Leighton 1997; Werner 1997; Burrell 1994; Carroll 1994; Darcy and Schramm 1977). Nevertheless, women continue to encounter electoral disadvantages from less obvious forms of bias (c.f. Sanbonmatsu 2006; Lawless and Fox 2005; Fox and Oxley 2003).

As scholarly analysis shifts to more subtle manifestations of gender discrimination, news coverage remains a prime suspect.<sup>2</sup> Women seeking public office no longer suffer

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<sup>1</sup> This was the tactic employed against Cornelia "Coya" Knutson, a Democrat in Minnesota's congressional delegation from 1955 – 1959 (Gunderson 2004).

<sup>2</sup> But media coverage is certainly not the only culprit. Female candidates have shed their novelty status, yet some states still have limited experience with women seeking major offices (Fox and Oxley 2003). Barriers toward women's political advancement also persist. Not only do women remain far less likely than men to deem themselves qualified to run for office (Lawless and Fox 2005; Fox and Lawless 2004),

the indignity of exile to the style section of the newspaper (Carroll and Schreiber 1997), but they do continue to complain about differential treatment in the media (Devitt 1999; Rausch, Rozell and Wilson 1999). The most obvious examples arise with press attention to candidate appearance, such as U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton's changing hairstyle, or Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's designer clothing and expensive jewelry. Yet family background, especially a woman's role as wife or mother, also stimulates frequent comment. Memoirs of women elected to Congress are full of accounts of such unwanted emphasis (Schroeder 1999; Witt, Paget and Matthews 1994), as well as their struggles to meet the media's bar to excel both as members of Congress and as caregivers (see Jamieson 1995). Finally, a default focus on "women's issues" often preoccupies the press, even if a female candidate is talking about taxes or foreign policy (c.f. Kahn 1996). Beyond such conventional gender profiling, however, women may encounter subtle, unobtrusive cues in terms of the language that describes their actions and positions as candidates.<sup>3</sup> Thus, *where* scholars look for gender distinctions often determines *what* they find.

Students of gender and politics have paid considerable attention to the ways in which language reproduces women's marginal status. Story frames, references to women's issues, and horse race coverage have all received scholarly analysis as possible indicators of media bias (Bystrom et al 2004; Norris 1997a; 1997b; Braden 1996; Weir

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but party leaders and electoral gatekeepers also continue to prefer male candidates (Sanbonmatsu 2006; Niven 1998).

<sup>3</sup> See Mendelberg (2001) for a similar pattern regarding the role of race and racial stereotyping in electoral politics.

1996; Carroll and Schreiber 1997; Kahn 1996). But missing from the research agenda is attention to patterns of speech that may play up stereotypes of women as less active and direct than men (Tannen 1994). The likelihood of finding such patterns, however, depends on both the timing and the context of individual races. On the one hand, the watershed 1992 election cycle – in which an unprecedented number of women were elected to public office – may have cued reporters to offer more equitable coverage of women candidates. On the other hand, apparent gender distinctions in campaign stories may vary widely with the characteristics of a particular contest, state, and newspaper. When, where, and how a candidate receives press coverage may explain, at least in part, his/her electoral performance.

Data limitations have hindered political scientists from testing these propositions empirically. For many years, the small numbers of female candidates for statewide offices made it difficult to control for the context of the race. Thus, one could not dismiss the possibility that apparent differences or similarities in the media's treatment of candidates that emerged from case studies simply reflected the competitiveness of the contest or the characteristics of a newspaper or state. After all, media outlets are not only highly sensitive to the competitiveness of statewide elections (Westlye 1991), but they also vary in how much coverage they devote to politics (Arnold 2005). In addition, newspaper reporting may reflect the political history or leanings of the state with respect to female politicians.

Contests for governor offer a striking example of the way in which context influences findings about the role of the media in women's campaigns. First, existing scholarship on gender and gubernatorial elections does not necessarily fit with women's

experiences. Kahn's (1994; 1996) seminal study of female candidates for statewide office in the 1980s concluded that women running for governor enjoyed higher rates of success than women seeking seats in the U.S. Senate because the issues involved in gubernatorial elections—education, health, social welfare—played to women's stereotypical strengths. Election results from the 1990s, when 39 women sought the governor's mansion, however, suggested that it proved more elusive for women than did Capitol Hill.<sup>4</sup> Second, women contesting races for governor in the 1990s complained about unfair treatment by the press (Devitt 1999). Yet researchers uncovered only modest gender differences in how the media handled statewide candidates during the decade (Smith 1997; Wells and King 1998; Bystrom et al 2004). These conflicting views remain salient today because they raise larger questions about the measures and methods scholars use to assess the extent and nature of the media's coverage of women candidates.

This research addresses such contradictions in two ways: by focusing on nuanced language differences in newspaper stories about gubernatorial campaigns; and by

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<sup>4</sup> During the 1970s, three of the six women who ran for governor as major party candidates won, and during the 1980s, five of the fourteen women who obtained their party's nomination were victorious. In contrast, only seven of the thirty-nine women who waged gubernatorial campaigns in the 1990s won their races. These numbers stand in stark contrast to women's steady gains in federal and state legislative offices during the same period. Based on extensive time series data covering a variety of state offices, Fox and Oxley (2003) argue that the issue agenda for female gubernatorial candidates is more problematic for women than Kahn supposed.

examining the implications of such unobtrusive disparities for women's electoral success. The analysis tests for the presence and the effects of subtle gender bias in newspaper content compared to more conventional measures, while controlling for a variety of potential influences on the type of coverage candidates receive. The evidence, which is based on fine-grained coding of more than 1,300 newspaper articles for 27 gubernatorial races between 1990 and 1997 in which a female candidate held a major party nomination, produces two central findings. First, gender stereotypes remained prevalent in press coverage during the 1990s, but they were not the conventional images scholars have previously explored. Men were more likely than women to receive coverage devoted to their actions, as opposed to their positions. In addition, attention to women's personal traits continued to invite media comment, but so did female candidates' professional and economic backgrounds. Whether these relationships reflect media bias or disparate campaign styles among women and men remains unclear. What is very clear, however, is the second finding: women did not fare as well at the polls as their male counterparts, even after accounting for press coverage and the characteristics of the contest, the state, and the newspaper. The results not only raise methodological issues about how to assess gender bias, but also suggest that sex remains a persistent, albeit elusive, factor in electoral politics.

### **The Intersection of Gender and Press Coverage: Background and Hypotheses**

Citizens' inattention to politics makes them depend on the media to assess candidates through a myriad of heuristics that reduce information costs (Rahn 2003; Iyengar et al 1997; McDermott 1997; Fiske and Neuberg 1990). Gender is one of the most

straightforward cues on which voters rely, as it can serve as a gauge of ideology, personal characteristics, issue priorities, and group-salient interests (Schaffner 2005; Lawless 2004; King and Matland 2003; Paolino 1995). Female candidates and office-holders, for example, are generally perceived as more liberal than male candidates of the same party (Koch 2000; McDermott 1998; 1997). Moreover, voters are more likely to identify men as assertive, active, and self-confident, while they identify women as more compassionate, willing to compromise, and “people-oriented” (Burrell 1994; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a; 1993b; Leeper 1991; Rosenwasser and Dean 1989). Men often are perceived as more competent than women in terms of legislating in the areas of military crises, crime, the economy, and agriculture, while women tend to garner more perceived expertise when the issues at hand are gender equity, education, health care, and poverty (Burrell 1994; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a; 1993b; Leeper 1991; Rosenwasser and Dean 1989). This kind of gender stereotyping is relevant not only because it demonstrates the degree to which traditional gender roles and expectations continue to exist in contemporary society, but also because it carries implications for the selection and evaluation of politicians (see Lawless 2004; Sanbonmatsu 2002; 2006). Press coverage, then, is critical because language has the power to reproduce and reinforce stereotypes that voters already hold.

Consistent with the trend in the literature to move beyond overt indicators of gender bias, this research assesses whether the media focus on various subtle speech distinctions in presenting women candidates. In addition to gauging conventional stereotypes about personal traits, family roles and women’s issues, the analysis investigates whether the early socialization of boys and girls that associates action with males and passivity with females carries over into electoral politics (c.f. Wright and Kane

1991). The expectation that males act and females relate emerges from popular lore, as well as from studies of child development and learning. Men tend to use direct, fact-oriented assertions, while women tend to stress connection and empathy (Tannen 1994).

When stereotyping becomes manifest in language, the differences are potentially detrimental to women's gubernatorial candidacies.<sup>5</sup> In politics, the language of action enables men to signal their decisiveness and ability to tackle hard problems. Conversely, the language of passivity – perhaps seen as empathy – enables women to signal their connectedness to the electorate and their ability to put the interests of the community ahead of their own. While there is evidence that empathy can sometimes be a benefit, it can also be a liability (Lawless 2004), perhaps more so in a gubernatorial race, where voters want a clear, decisive CEO, not a cooperative committee member.

Thus, based on the gender stereotyping and childhood development literatures, we expect that the press actively perpetuates, either consciously or unconsciously, gendered coverage of gubernatorial candidates. Further, we expect that distinctions between men as “doers” and women as “relaters” are as important in perpetuating gender stereotypes as conventional measures of personal attributes, women's issues, and background

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<sup>5</sup> Previous research finds that voters deem “masculine” characteristics more important than “feminine” traits in politics, regardless of the level of office at stake (e.g., Rosenwasser and Dean 1989). This is hardly surprising; traits ordinarily considered “masculine,” such as assertiveness and self-confidence, are virtual prerequisites for campaigning and fundraising (Burrell 1994; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a; 1993b; Leeper 1991; Rosenwasser and Dean 1989). Characteristics such as sensitivity or willingness to compromise tend not to bear, at least as directly, on prospects for political success.

characteristics. Because these language differences can undermine campaign themes and policy proposals, as well as focus voters' attention on group-based cues rather than individual accomplishments, the analysis also posits that gender stereotypes affect vote share. Women candidates with a record in public office, however, may manage to mitigate the effect if they can point to past actions and accomplishments as predictors of future competence.

Female candidates who have lost gubernatorial races certainly think press coverage was a factor in their loss (Rausch, Rozell and Wilson 1999). Yet the small number of cases in most studies has precluded a systematic examination of cause and effect. If gender stereotyping and gendered language pervades press coverage and affects high-profile races, then it must withstand the following series of controls:

*Characteristics of the Race:* Given women's newcomer status to electoral politics in the 1970s and 1980s, when scholars conducted much of the research on media bias, female candidates had fewer opportunities to acquire politically relevant credentials and often served as sacrificial lambs. This traditionally afforded reporters an opportunity to focus on women's personality traits, appearance, language, and lack of political experience. Moreover, reporters' inclination to ignore noncompetitive races (Westlye 1991) had the potential to marginalize women who ran in them.<sup>6</sup> Even though more

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<sup>6</sup> Kahn (1996) suggests that women received more equitable coverage running for governor because gubernatorial races were typically more competitive than senatorial contests, so gender was less of a factor in the media's horserace coverage of poll standings and campaign resources. Other scholars who have looked at bias in horserace coverage of female gubernatorial candidates have also uncovered little. Moreover, a case

women now contest statewide offices and garner nominations for open seats, it remains relevant to control for a candidate's level of experience and whether he/she is challenging an incumbent.

In addition, the so-called "Year of the Woman" elections in 1992 produced a major shift in the electoral landscape. Indeed, the early 1990s marked a threshold in the types of offices women were likely to contest (Fox and Oxley 2003). The "Year of the Woman," therefore, was a potentially transformative event that may have sensitized media outlets to issues of gender bias. Hence, any analysis of press coverage should account for when the race occurred.

Finally, it is important to distinguish coverage immediately before the general election from stories written following the primaries, as well as the timing of the primaries. Both factors can affect the nature of reporting as levels of campaign intensity change.<sup>7</sup>

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study by Rausch, Rozell and Wilson (1999) demonstrates that negative coverage of women can arise because of a poorly run campaign, thereby suggesting that gender effects are very difficult to disentangle from other aspects of the race. For both reasons, we do not deal with coverage of campaign tactics or perceived candidate viability.

<sup>7</sup> Differential treatment of men and women in statewide races may originate at the primary stage of the election (Banwart, Bystrom and Robertson 2003). Although this is an interesting finding in its own right, it creates potential for measurement error. Given that many states hold primaries in mid-August or early September, scholars whose datasets begin with September 1 – and many do – co-mingle observations from two different types of contests.

***Characteristics of the State:*** A state's political context can also generate variation in the coverage of women candidates. Women are less likely to run for governor in the South and more likely to compete in states with a tradition of electing women (Fox and Oxley 2003). The ideological propensities of a state's voters affect where women emerge as candidates (Koch 2000). Similar to the way in which these influences may affect candidate recruitment, they may also influence newspaper coverage. If we are to disentangle gendered media coverage from a state's characteristics and political culture, then we must control for the novelty of women in state government, the state's political ideology, and the state's orientation toward traditional roles for women.

***Characteristics of the Newspaper:*** Newspapers vary on several dimensions that influence the quantity and content of coverage they devote to electoral politics. Indeed, Kahn (1996) finds that disparities in the quantity of coverage about female statewide candidates disappear after controlling for a newspaper's circulation, while Wells and King (1998) demonstrate that large papers are more likely than small papers to emphasize gender. In addition, research indicates wide differences in the resources newspapers devote to politics (Arnold 2005; Smith 1997). Large newspapers have more room for news, but more demands for space, including expectations among readers for coverage of national and international concerns. Similarly, newspapers devote more attention to state elections in non-presidential years when there is less competition for political space. Both factors affect the number and length of articles pertaining to gubernatorial elections. Finally, editorial decisions about the type of article a reporter produces have an impact on the amount and nature of its content (Arnold 2005). A straight news piece will have little

room for discussion of the traits and issues that are conventional markers for gender bias, but a profile piece provides ample opportunity for a reporter to indulge in stereotyping. In order to identify gendered coverage with confidence, then, it is important to take into account the circulation of the newspaper, whether the race occurs in a presidential election year, and the length of the article.<sup>8</sup>

By looking carefully at patterns of language and controlling for contextual effects, the analysis produces a more nuanced view of how female gubernatorial candidates fare in the news media. If sex remains a significant predictor of *newspaper content* once the characteristics of the race, state, and newspaper are controlled, then evidence of gender bias in content is compelling. Conversely, if sex exerts an independent effect on *candidates' final vote share* in the presence of controls for contextual effects and gendered newspaper content, then a persuasive case emerges to look beyond the media for other factors shaping women's electoral fortunes.

### **The Dataset**

The analysis relies on press coverage of 27 races between 1990 and 1997 in which

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<sup>8</sup> Major state newspapers are the most appropriate data source because their coverage is typically more relevant and accessible than that provided by television. The national television networks tend to provide only minimal coverage of individual governor's races, and local stations offer less electoral coverage of statewide races than do newspapers. More importantly, voters gain more information about statewide races from newspapers than they do from television (Goldenberg and Traugott 1987; Westlye 1991).

a female candidate held a major party nomination for governor.<sup>9</sup> The data come from each state's most widely distributed newspaper, accessed through Lexis-Nexus, Dialog, and microfiche.<sup>10</sup> The dataset includes all news articles and news analyses two weeks immediately following the primary and two weeks prior to the general election.<sup>11</sup> It

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<sup>9</sup> During this time period, 29 women obtained their party's nomination to run for governor, but two of them campaigned in states – Hawaii in 1994 and Delaware in 1996 – for which major newspapers were not available either electronically or on microfiche. Because we could not examine press coverage garnered in these two races, we exclude them from our analysis.

<sup>10</sup> In New Jersey, Texas, and Maine, the most widely distributed newspaper was not accessible through Lexis-Nexus, Dialog, or microfiche, so we relied on acceptable on-line substitutes. For New Jersey, we used the *Bergen Record*, the third largest circulation newspaper in the state. For Texas and Maine, we used the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Portland Press Herald*, the second largest circulation newspapers in their respective states.

<sup>11</sup> Primaries pose several challenges for determining the time frame for the study. A large number of primary contestants may diminish the coverage that each candidate receives, while the absence of rivalry for one or both party nominations may lead to minimal press attention. A lack of articles or mentions of individual candidates under such circumstances may reveal more about a newspaper's allocation of space than its orientation toward women candidates. The incidence of late primaries further complicates matters by creating the potential for measurement error from mixing articles about two types of races. A woman who succeeds in winning her party's nomination

excludes editorials, op-ed columns, letters to the editor, and passing references to the candidates in articles that do not pertain to the election. A total of 1,365 articles contained an average of 20 paragraphs per article. Some articles contained mentions of both candidates, while others referred to only one candidate. Consequently, the dataset is organized by candidate rather than article, with values of zero where appropriate, for a total of 2,730 observations.

For each observation, there are two sets of variables: the content of the newspaper article and the controls for the characteristics of the contest, state, and newspaper. The content variables gauge both conventional measures of gender bias and stereotyping, as well more subtle cues. More specifically, there are five types of content codes for each observation. The first category includes references to personal traits that tend to be gendered, such as appearance, mannerisms, personality, and marital and parental status. The second tracks references to “women’s issues,” which tend to focus on social welfare policy. The third content code captures references to gender neutral personal background attributes (professional, economic, and family background, such as politically relevant relatives, for example). The fourth notes mentions of political background and prior

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may spark different treatment from reporters than one who is part of a pack. Thirteen of the 27 races had primaries in mid-August or early September, so timing is not a trivial issue. Our method of dividing the coverage controls for possible shifts in newspaper coverage between primary and general elections, and also produces matched pairs of major-party candidates. A disadvantage of our approach is that some of the coverage is fairly distant from Election Day. In addition to controlling for the type of election, we control for the distance between the two types of coverage.

office holding experience. Finally, and most importantly, the fifth type of code addresses the language of action and position taking as reflections of more subtle types of stereotyping.<sup>12</sup>

Actions refer to measures candidates have taken to do something about a particular issue – either as incumbents or in offices prior to their bid for governor – or to specific steps they promise to take when elected. Expressions of action, for example, include sponsoring a bill, balancing the budget, reducing crime by some percentage, or presenting a plan to accomplish an objective. Statements about positions pertain to candidates’ opinions and platforms about issues without reference to past actions or specific proposals for implementation. Empathetic or relational references, or general statements of support or opposition, such as favoring a healthy environment, supporting family values, or improving economic opportunity, constitute positions.<sup>13</sup>

The content variables function in the analysis first as dependent variables in which the frequency of each mention in the article is the measurement unit. Subsequently, the content mentions assume the role of independent variables that predict each candidate’s percentage of the two-party vote. The control variables are straightforward measures that capture contextual effects for the contest, state, and

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<sup>12</sup> The distinction is partly one of credit-claiming versus position-taking, but it rests as well on the types of verbs used in the article and the specificity of the statements.

<sup>13</sup> Twenty-two of the contests were coded independently with 95 percent intercoder reliability. The discrepancies were then resolved on a case-by-case basis. The remaining seven contests were coded by a different individual who first replicated the initial work on seven states before coding the remaining cases.

newspaper, although many have not previously been employed in research on gender and elections. (See Appendix A for a complete description of the variable coding and descriptive statistics.)

## **Results**

### ***Gender Stereotyping in Gubernatorial Press Coverage***

The analysis begins with an assessment of the types of coverage men and women garner. The data presented in Figure 1 summarize the total number of mentions of each type of newspaper content during the transitional decade of the 1990s. The majority of the coverage tends to focus on the candidates' positions, but political background, personal background, "women's issues," personal traits, and candidates' actions also receive regular attention.

#### **Figure 1 about here**

In terms of the conventional indicators of gender stereotyping in newspaper content, few differences emerge in the coverage of male and female candidates. At the aggregate level, women gubernatorial candidates receive 49 percent of the total coverage devoted to political background, 48 percent of the mentions of personal background, and 47 percent of the coverage focusing on "women's issues." Any advantage women may traditionally have gained from focusing on such issues as education, childcare or health (see Iyengar et al 1997), then, has largely disappeared. Not only do women's issues receive relatively little attention, but they are also equally likely to comprise men and women's campaign coverage.<sup>14</sup> The one traditional gauge of gender stereotyping that remains prevalent is

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<sup>14</sup> If women are appealing to voter stereotypes about particular competency in such

attention to personal traits: women receive nearly 84 percent more coverage than men regarding appearance, mannerisms, personality, and marital and parental status. Put somewhat differently, women receive 65 percent of coverage that focuses on personal traits.

Comparing action and position coverage, though, reveals a dramatic gender difference. Women receive slightly more press coverage than men for their positions (53 percent of the position coverage goes to women candidates), whereas men are nearly twice as likely as women to receive coverage devoted to their actions (64 percent of the action coverage goes to men). Perhaps reporters selectively screen out women's past and proposed actions in favor of a more passive portrayal of their issue positions. Or perhaps men running for governor highlight their actions more aggressively through advertising and public statements. Regardless of the reason for the gender gaps in position and action coverage, the data suggest that, at least at the aggregate level, male gubernatorial candidates are more likely than women to be portrayed as "doers."

These differences in newspaper content are not merely an artifact of the particular features of a race, state, or newspaper. Table 1 presents the coefficients and standard errors for contextual controls from a series of negative binomial regression equations that predict

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issues, then the press is not transmitting the signal to the electorate. Moreover, it appears that men adjust to the presence of female candidates by calibrating their attention to women's issues to match their opponents—or at least that is how the press reports it (see Fox 1997). This result stands in stark contrast to Kahn's (1996) findings for the 1980s.

different types of newspaper content.<sup>15</sup> In each of these equations, the dependent variable is a count of the number of mentions of each type of content coverage a candidate received.<sup>16</sup>

**Table 1 about here**

Although some variation occurs across equations, the results are fairly consistent with the bivariate comparisons presented in Figure 1, and the impact of the contextual effects confirms the hypothesized relationships. Longer articles are more likely to include more types of content coverage, and articles right before the general election or in races

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<sup>15</sup> The analysis relies on six separate equations because efforts to combine the different types of newspaper content variables using principal component analysis indicated that each measure tapped into a different dimension of candidate coverage.

<sup>16</sup> These count data have some characteristics of a Poisson distribution, but do not meet the test of equal mean and variance. Thus, it is appropriate to use negative binomial regression instead of ordinary least squares regression or Poisson regression. Indeed, the highly significant alpha parameters mark the presence of over dispersion in the data. Because the high incidence of zero content mentions is not random – space constraints limit the amount of discretion available to reporters and editors to engage in gender stereotyping – zero-inflated negative binomial regression models were also tested. The Vuong Test indicates that zero-inflated negative binomial regression is preferable in only two of the six equations. The inflation parameter is significant in only one of the equations. There is a difference in the significance of sex in the model predicting personal and professional background, but generally the results are substantively the same. See Appendix B for the coefficients and robust standard errors.

with late primaries produce more references to actions, positions, personal traits, and “women’s issues.” In addition, highly “qualified” candidates are more likely to receive coverage that focuses on their actions rather than their positions, and they are less likely to garner mentions of their personal traits, backgrounds or women’s issues. The receptivity of the state to female politicians does not consistently influence newspaper content. The percentage of female legislators and the state’s ideology are significant in four of the six equations, but attitudes about traditional gender roles are significant in only two of the models. These findings may reflect the fact that southern states are under-represented in the dataset because women neither seek nor obtain nominations for governor in the South.<sup>17</sup>

More striking than the impact of the contextual effects, however, is that even after controlling for the characteristics of the contest, state, and newspaper, gender influences press coverage. Somewhat unexpectedly, sex is less important in predicting the more conventional measures of stereotyping. It is not at all significant in predicting coverage of positions, women’s issues, or political background. But sex is a factor in the amount of personal trait and personal background coverage a candidate garners, and it strongly predicts action coverage.

Because the regression coefficients do not lend themselves to straightforward interpretation, Table 2 presents the substantive effect of each statistically significant independent variable on the three types of newspaper content related to candidate sex. Each entry represents a “maximum change in probability,” which is the independent effect

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<sup>17</sup> Because of multicollinearity concerns, the regression analyses do not include newspaper circulation as a contextual effect; it correlates with the total number of paragraphs in the article at more than 0.58 ( $p < .05$ ).

exerted by a statistically significant variable as its value moves from its minimum to its maximum, holding all other variables at their sample means and modes.

### **Table 2 about here**

The entries in the first two columns of Table 2 indicate that, all else equal, women are 3.5 percentage points more likely than men to receive attention to their personal traits, and slightly less likely than men to garner coverage of their professional or economic backgrounds. In each of these cases, though, the effect of sex pales in comparison to the other predictors of coverage. Nevertheless, whereas reporters are just as likely to cover similarly situated men and women's issue priorities, political experiences, and positions, they are more likely to devote the remainder of their coverage to men's politically relevant backgrounds and women's personal traits.

The main finding to emerge from Table 2, however, pertains to action coverage. Prior to the Year of the Woman, men were roughly three times more likely than women to receive newspaper coverage devoted to their actions. More specifically, whereas the "average" male gubernatorial candidate had a 0.21 predicted probability of receiving a mention of some type of action in a newspaper article, the "average" female candidate had only a 0.07 probability. After the 1992 election cycle, all coverage of candidates' actions increased, but men were disproportionate beneficiaries. That is, the average male candidate's predicted probability of receiving action coverage increased to 0.43, but the average woman's likelihood of garnering press attention to actions increased to only 0.08. The gender gap in action coverage, therefore, grew considerably. Despite scholarly evidence that 1992 might have been a watershed year for women's emergence as candidates and levels of victory, there does not seem to have been a comparable change in

the type of press coverage women received.

Candidate quality only partially mitigates the gender stereotyping in action coverage. Incumbent governors are, on average, nearly 40 percentage points more likely than political novices to receive action coverage. Even among these most highly qualified candidates, though, women are 20 percentage points less likely than men to garner any mention of their actions. In fact, the gender gap in the likelihood of receiving action coverage still exists between a woman who is an incumbent governor and a man who has no political experience; the woman's predicted probability of receiving action coverage is .14, compared to .17 for the man.

The overall pattern of news coverage of races involving male and female gubernatorial candidates reveals clear gender disparities, but not always in the way that scholars typically have measured them. The question remaining is whether these gender differences in coverage carry implications for political success.

### ***Gendered Press Coverage and Vote Share***

Despite clear evidence of gender differences in press coverage, newspaper content, contrary to expectations, does not appear to exert an independent impact on a candidate's vote share. Table 3 presents the coefficients and standard errors from three weighted least squares regression equations. In each equation, the candidate is the unit of analysis and the dependent variable is the percent of the two-party vote the candidate received. The weight accounts for turnout in the gubernatorial election for the relevant year. In addition to candidate sex, the equations include measures of the gendered content in the analysis above: the total amount of coverage pertaining to personal traits,

personal background, and action that each candidate received. Each equation also includes a series of contextual controls.<sup>18</sup> Although candidate sex is a statistically significant predictor of vote share, the amount of coverage devoted to a candidate's actions, personal traits, and political background do not affect the two-party vote. Perhaps these null finding result from the fact that newspaper coverage constitutes only a relatively small part of the information environment in gubernatorial campaigns.

**Table 3 about here**

More important, however, is the fact that sex exerts the largest relative effect on men and women's performance at the polls. Controlling for press coverage and contextual effects, the models predict that male gubernatorial candidates fare better than women by a margin of at least 11-12 percentage points. The impact of candidate quality, the other significant predictor of electoral success, pales in comparison. The difference in vote share garnered between an incumbent governor and a candidate with no previous political experience, for example, is roughly 7 – 9 percentage points. In other words, all else equal, a man with no political experience whatsoever still outperforms his female opponent, even when she is an incumbent governor.

Although these models are parsimonious and include only 27 elections, the results indicate that a candidate's sex affects his/her election outcome, regardless of the types of

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<sup>18</sup> Because the unit of analysis is the candidate, the regression equations include only 54 observations. To preserve degrees of freedom, the models include only the most substantively meaningful controls for the context of the contest, state, and newspaper. Substituting these controls with others employed in the equations presented in Table 1 does not change the results.

press coverage received, or the nature of the contest, state, or newspaper. Barriers against female candidates who seek state legislative or congressional seats may have diminished, but women vying to be governor in the 1990s faced a very different environment.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The results from analyzing newspaper content for subtle language distinctions between male and female gubernatorial candidates are somewhat perplexing. On the one hand, conventional measures of gender stereotyping reveal relatively little differentiation in the way newspapers present men and women. Even frequent attention to the personnel traits of women is only weakly related to sex once the characteristics of the race, state, and newspaper are taken into account. On the other hand, depictions of men as more active than women are quite pervasive. Despite the presence of subtle cues, stereotypical newspaper content is not a significant predictor of candidates' vote share at the polls. Yet sex remains a huge factor in women's success in seeking the governor's office, at least in the 1990s. In other words, the persistent complaints about an uneven playing field are accurate, but women have been pointing in the wrong direction.

Perhaps these findings are simply an artifact of the transitional decade of the 1990s. Perhaps the confusing picture is the product of the small number of cases available for study. Perhaps the conventional measures of gender bias are not particularly significant because women tend to run for office only in states that are hospitable to their candidacies. The temptation, then, is to urge more data collection over more years. Although a Herculean task to replicate this project's fine-grained coding scheme and extensive data collection, it holds promise as more women gain major party nominations.

Nevertheless, the findings raise more immediate questions about gender and electoral politics that have both methodological and substantive implications.

In methodological terms, it is important for scholars who undertake content analysis—not just on gender and campaigns, but on many different types of political behaviors—to recognize how space constraints and editorial decisions about the type of article to feature can affect the frequency of observations. The absence of a particular type of content in an article may mean that a reporter or paper is bias-free or uninterested in a particular trait or subject; or, it may mean that there was no room to talk about such things. Paradoxically, longer stories appear to give more play to content that is potentially detrimental or discriminatory.

Second, the fact that the number of women obtaining nominations to run for governor remains small has potential consequences for how one interprets the results. The under-representation of southern states (Texas and Virginia only) in the dataset suggests that women do not run for governor in more traditional states. Presumably, the states in which they do run are more likely to have newspapers that avoid obviously stereotypical coverage. Even if the states in the dataset are “good” places for women to run, though, language distinctions are pervasive. Under the potentially best-case scenarios, then, the glass is both half full and half empty for female candidates. More importantly, in states where voters have proved willing to nominate women, sex remains a major obstacle to success, although it operates indirectly through mechanisms as yet unknown. For future research designs, the absence, so far, of appropriate instruments to control for endogeneity remains a pressing issue.

In more substantive terms, the results are relevant to debates about the gendered

overtone of executive offices. Kahn's (1994; 1996) work suggests that the agenda confronting governors is uniquely favorable to women because it addresses issues that play to women's strengths, such as education, health and welfare. Fox and Oxley (2003) make a very different argument, suggesting that the position of governor demands leadership traits, such as decisiveness and toughness, which stereotypically favor men and raise the bar for women. The depressing effect of sex on women's vote share in this analysis lends considerable merit to the latter point of view. If voters perceive women as "relaters" and men as "deciders" and "doers," then the emphasis among journalists on male action and experience accentuates the challenges women confront in aspiring to the governor's mansion. Considered more broadly, such expectations may prove to have consequences for any woman's bid for the White House.

Overall, the results suggest how persistent and elusive gender effects in politics can be. What is striking about this analysis is how little purchase the "usual suspects" provide in analyzing media bias and electoral outcomes. Scholars need to be more creative in thinking about how to uncover the roots of gender differences and assessing their impact. The good news for researchers who study gender and politics is that recent progress in the political advancement of women still leaves plenty of room for them to exercise their talents.

## Appendix A: Variable Description

Variable	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coding
<b>GENDER STEREOTYPING IN NEWSPAPER CONTENT</b>				
Sex (Female)	0, 1	.50	.50	Indicates whether the candidate is a woman (1) or a man (0).
Personal Traits	0 – 47	.25	1.70	Number of references in an article to the candidate’s personal attributes, such as appearance, mannerisms, personality, and marital status and parental status.
Women’s Issues	0 – 12	.14	.76	Number of references in an article about so-called “women’s issues,” which involve social welfare.
Personal Background	0 – 33	.36	1.41	Number of references in an article to the candidates’ professional, economic, or family background, such as politically relevant relatives.
Political Background	0 – 20	.24	.93	Number of references in an article to the candidate’s political background or prior office-holding.
Action Coverage	0 – 16	.23	1.01	Number of references in an article to the candidate’s past accomplishments or statements of intended action.
Position Coverage	0 – 21	.98	2.18	Number of references in an article to the candidate’s opinions or statements of general support or opposition.
<b>CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEST</b>				
Vote Share	20.80 – 79.20	50.00	9.83	Indicates the percentage of the two party vote share the candidate received in the election.

Variable	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coding
<b>CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEST continued</b>				
Year of the Woman	0, 1	.59	.50	Indicates whether the election occurred after 1992's "Year of the Woman" (1) or not (0).
Open Seat	0, 1	.54	.50	Indicates whether the race is an open seat (1) or not.
Candidate Quality	0 – 5	3.47	1.29	Indicates the candidate's level of previous political experience. Ranges from none (0) to incumbent governor (5).
Primary	1, 2	1.70	.46	Indicates whether the article immediately follows the primary (1) or comes just prior to the general election (2).
Primary Month	3 – 9	6.69	1.87	Indicates calendar month of the primary.
<b>CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STATE</b>				
Percentage of Women in the State Legislature	6.70 – 40.10	20.15	7.18	Indicates the percentage of women in the state's legislature at the time of the election. Data provided by the Center for American Women and Politics.
Political Ideology	-37.85 – -13.23	-22.34	6.53	Indicates the difference between self-reported conservatives and liberals taken from state exit polls.
Traditional Gender Roles	2.10 – 19.20	10.69	4.77	Indicates the percentage of voters who identify themselves as born-again Christians. Data taken from Winters 2002.
<b>CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEWSPAPER</b>				
Circulation	38,649 – 1,536,547	484,974.1	489,416.6	Indicates the newspaper's average Sunday readership for a particular election year.

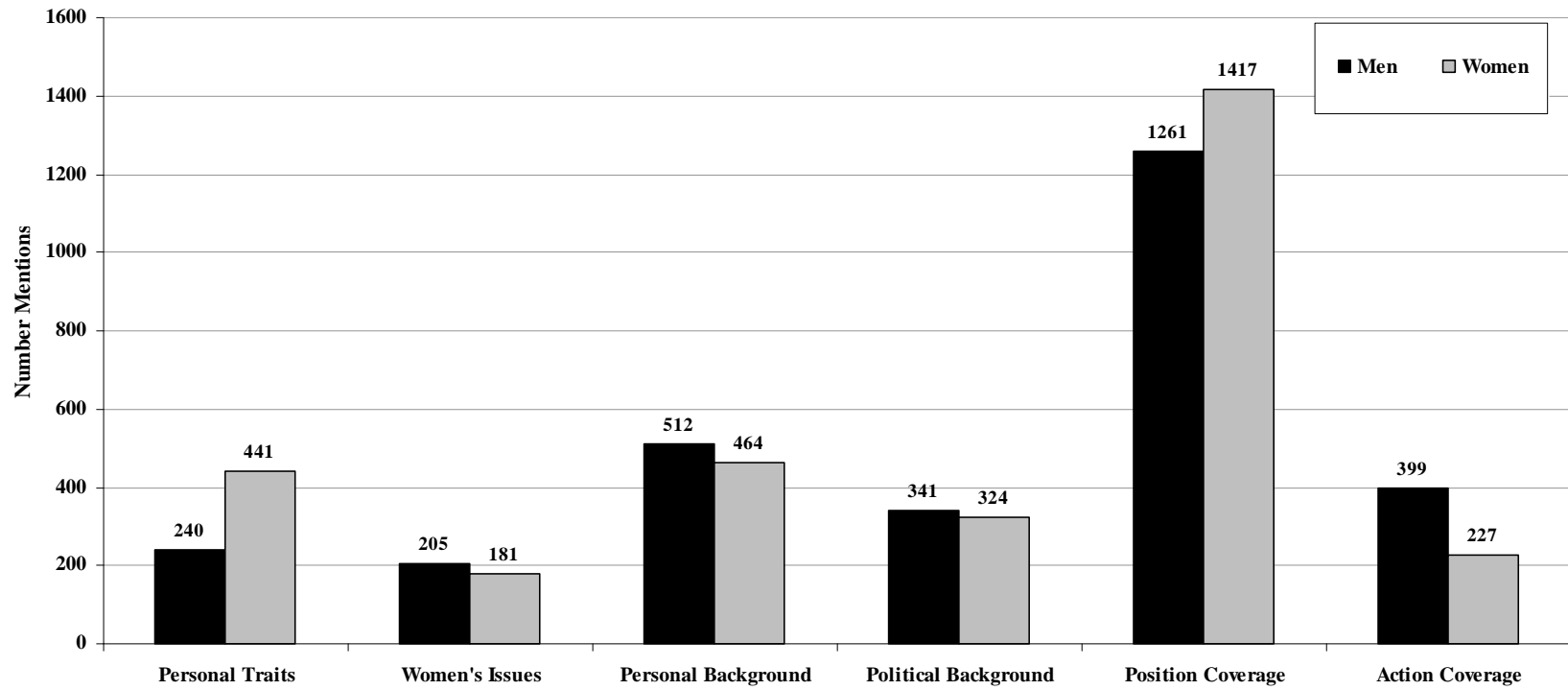
Variable	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coding
<b>CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEWSPAPER continued</b>				
Presidential Election Year	0, 1	.30	.46	Indicates whether the race occurs in a presidential election year (1) or not (0).
Paragraphs	0 – 117	19.76	12.05	Indicates the total number of paragraphs in the article.

**Appendix B: Types of Press Coverage Gubernatorial Candidates Receive, 1990 – 1997**  
**Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Regression Coefficients (and Standard Errors)**

	<b>Personal Traits</b>	<b>Women's Issues</b>	<b>Personal Background</b>	<b>Political Background</b>	<b>Position Coverage</b>	<b>Action Coverage</b>
<b>Sex (Female)</b>	.462 (.249) *	-.436 (.385)	-.393 (.184) **	-.169 (.191)	.005 (.112)	-1.246 (.313) ***
<b>Characteristics of the Contest</b>						
Post-Year of the Woman	.322 (.255)	.284 (.338)	.473 (.178) ***	.530 (.182) ***	-.018 (.116)	.161 (.207)
Open Seat	.190 (.230)	-.092 (.240)	.069 (.140)	.215 (.134)	.135 (.087)	.307 (.188)
Candidate Quality	-.145 (.058) **	-.166 (.082) **	-.186 (.045) ***	-.015 (.051)	-.008 (.034)	.369 (.088) ***
Coverage Right Before General Election	.502 (.196) ***	.983 (.312) ***	.165 (.131)	.005 (.127)	.334 (.087) ***	.665 (.167) ***
Month of the Primary	-.013 (.065)	.222 (.076) ***	-.008 (.053)	.038 (.050)	.093 (.030) ***	.135 (.050) ***
Sex * Year of the Woman	.222 (.376)	.420 (.456)	.394 (.247)	.067 (.246)	.104 (.154)	.876 (.345) **
<b>Characteristics of the State</b>						
Percentage Women in State Legislature	-.035 (.017) **	-.018 (.016)	-.035 (.012) ***	-.033 (.012) ***	.003 (.007)	-.042 (.017) **
Political Ideology	.018 (.016)	-.035 (.023)	-.020 (.010) *	-.018 (.010) *	-.027 (.007) ***	.003 (.013)
Traditional Gender Roles	-.008 (.022)	.035 (.023)	.035 (.018) **	.041 (.015) ***	.010 (.010)	.015 (.018)
<b>Characteristics of the Newspaper</b>						
Presidential Election Year	.477 (.260) *	-.192 (.291)	.265 (.168)	.173 (.161)	-.204 (.118) *	.236 (.250)
Total Number Paragraphs in Article	.043 (.007) ***	.031 (.022)	.039 (.006) ***	.041 (.006) ***	.032 (.004) ***	.038 (.006) ***
<b>Constant</b>	-2.292 (.741) ***	-5.789 (2.482) **	-2.028 (.567) ***	-3.228 (.580) ***	-2.754 (.368) ***	-5.133 (.734) ***
<b>Inflation Parameters</b>						
Total Paragraphs	-1.517 (.962)	-.046 (.111)	-.651 (.400)	-.917 (.437) **	-.252 (.164)	-.025 (.097)
Constant	7.904 (4.465)	.297 (3.072)	2.702 (1.630) *	2.865 (1.172) **	-.104 (.728)	-11.754 (8.855)
<b>Alpha</b>	2.532 (.016) ***	2.201 (1.855)	1.463 (.029) ***	1.306 (.033) ***	.983 (.038) ***	2.060 (.024) ***
<b>Number of Observations</b>	2,666	2,666	2,666	2,666	2,666	2,666

Significance Levels: \* p < .10; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01.

Figure 1 - Types of Press Coverage Garnered by Male and Female Gubernatorial Candidates, 1990 - 1997



**Table 1: Types of Press Coverage Gubernatorial Candidates Receive, 1990 – 1997**  
**Negative Binomial Regression Coefficients (and Standard Errors)**

	<b>Personal Traits</b>	<b>Women's Issues</b>	<b>Personal Background</b>	<b>Political Background</b>	<b>Position Coverage</b>	<b>Action Coverage</b>
<b>Sex (Female)</b>	.450 (.252) *	-.432 (.386)	-.393 (.186) **	-.167 (.191)	.005 (.112)	-1.246 (.313) ***
<b>Characteristics of the Contest</b>						
Post-Year of the Woman	.564 (.291) *	.692 (.335) **	.866 (.205) ***	.600 (.190) ***	.078 (.107)	1.037 (.319) ***
Open Seat	.207 (.232)	-.066 (.229)	.063 (.143)	.210 (.135)	.120 (.087)	.307 (.188)
Candidate Quality	-.119 (.057) **	-.166 (.082) **	-.176 (.046) ***	-.010 (.050)	-.005 (.034)	.369 (.088) ***
Coverage Right Before General Election	.468 (.197) **	1.009 (.276) ***	.141 (.131)	-.011 (.126)	.322 (.088) ***	.665 (.168) ***
Month of the Primary	-.017 (.065)	.220 (.075) ***	-.011 (.054)	.037 (.050)	.096 (.030) ***	.135 (.050) ***
Sex * Year of the Woman	-.225 (.379)	-.394 (.445)	.385 (.249)	.061 (.246)	-.093 (.153)	-.876 (.375) **
<b>Characteristics of the State</b>						
Percentage Women in State Legislature	-.039 (.016) **	-.019 (.016)	-.037 (.012) ***	-.034 (.012) ***	.002 (.007)	-.042 (.017) **
Political Ideology	.018 (.016)	-.035 (.018) **	-.021 (.011) **	-.018 (.010) *	-.027 (.007) ***	.003 (.014)
Traditional Gender Roles	-.012 (.023)	.032 (.023)	.032 (.018) *	.040 (.015) ***	.009 (.010)	.015 (.018)
<b>Characteristics of the Newspaper</b>						
Presidential Election Year	.453 (.260) *	-.277 (.273)	.228 (.165)	.162 (.161)	-.217 (.117) *	.236 (.252)
Total Number Paragraphs in Article	.051 (.007) ***	.044 (.008) ***	.044 (.005) ***	.044 (.005) ***	.037 (.003) ***	.038 (.006) ***
<b>Constant</b>	-2.424 (.755) ***	-6.484 (.977) **	-2.125 (.571) ***	-3.270 (.580) ***	-2.842 (.364) ***	-5.133 (.734) ***
<b>Alpha</b>	13.173 (1.539) ***	13.929 (1.876) ***	4.510 (.501) ***	3.757 (.453) ***	2.814 (.154) ***	7.847 (.980) ***
<b>Wald Statistic</b>	107.790***	66.790 ***	131.320 ***	102.590 ***	188.000 ***	104.470 ***
<b>Number of Observations</b>	2,666	2,666	2,666	2,666	2,666	2,666

Significance Levels: \* p < .10; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01.

**Table 2: The Substantive Effects of Gender and Context on of Press Coverage:  
Maximum Changes in Predicted Probabilities**

	<b>Personal Traits</b>	<b>Personal Background</b>	<b>Action Coverage</b>
<b>Sex (Female)</b>	.035	-.002	-.348
<b>Characteristics of the Contest</b>			
Post-Year of the Woman	.067	.162	.219
Open Seat	--	--	--
Candidate Quality	-.092	-.205	.397
Coverage Right Before General Election	.058	--	.151
Month of the Primary	--	--	.123
<b>Characteristics of the State</b>			
Percentage Women in State Legislature	-.081	-.119	-.147
Political Ideology	--	-.061	--
Traditional Gender Roles	--	.068	--
<b>Characteristics of the Newspaper</b>			
Presidential Election Year	.075	--	--
Total Number Paragraphs in Article	.178	.234	.221

Note: These substantive effects are based on the regression equations presented in Table 1. The probabilities were calculated by setting all continuous independent variable not under consideration to their means and all dummy variables not under consideration to their modes. Each entry represents the maximum change in probability for each statistically significant variable (i.e., the sex probability reflects the fact that a woman is 34.8 percentage points less likely than a man, all else equal, to receive action coverage). For all continuous variables, we varied the values from one standard deviation above to one standard deviation below the mean.

**Table 3: The Effects of Gender and Newspaper Coverage on Gubernatorial Vote Share, 1990 – 1997**  
**Weighted Least Squares Regression Coefficients (and Standard Errors)**

	<u>Model One</u>	<u>Model Two</u>	<u>Model Three</u>
<b>Gender Effects</b>			
Sex (Female)	-12.865 (1.980) **	-12.799 (2.090) **	-11.090 (1.753) **
Action Coverage	-.096 (.062)	--	--
Gendered Traits	--	.084 (.068)	--
Personal Background Coverage	--	--	.099 (.090)
<b>Characteristics of the Contest</b>			
Post-Year of the Woman	.325 (2.496)	-.195 (2.548)	-.444 (2.616)
Open Seat	-2.825 (2.385)	-2.132 (2.361)	-1.075 (2.553)
Candidate Quality	1.885 (.759) **	1.878 (.783) **	1.419 (.735) *
<b>Characteristics of the State</b>			
Percentage Women in State Legislature	-.041 (.140)	.005 (.143)	.002 (.143)
<b>Characteristics of the Newspaper</b>			
Total Number Paragraphs in Article	.000 (.002)	-.002 (.002)	-.002 (.002)
Constant	53.029 (3.949) **	52.677 (3.978) **	52.211 (4.016) **
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.451	.441	.437
N	54	54	54

Significance Levels: \* p < .10; \*\* p < .05.

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