

UC Berkeley

Cal-in-Sac Undergraduate Research Products

Title

Framed to Fail: How Journalism Shapes and Sinks Women's Campaigns

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0073435j>

Author

Huang, Catherine

Publication Date

2025-08-08

Framed to Fail: How Journalism Shapes and Sinks Women's Campaigns

By Catherine Huang, 2025 Cal-in-Sacramento and Jo Freeman Women in Politics Fellow*

In a year where [many hoped to see a woman finally break the highest glass ceiling in American politics](#), 2024 left us with a familiar outcome: another male president. No woman has yet held the presidential position in the U.S. to date. Despite [record numbers of women in Congress](#), accounting for 28% of lawmakers, and [growing public support for female leaders](#), the highest office remains stubbornly out of reach. Why? Part of the answer lies in how we talk about the women who run and how the media frames their every move.

I remember watching Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign when I was just a sixth-grader in middle school. At the time, I didn't fully understand the policies or debates, but I clearly remember how often people criticized her for things that didn't seem to matter.

Her voice. Her clothing. Her smile.

It made me wonder why being a woman in politics meant having to meet impossible standards. That feeling stuck with me, and as I've grown older, I've come to realize how those media narratives shaped public perception far more than I realized back then. Now, as I prepare to enter my junior year in college, I still think about how much her candidacy was shaped not just by her political record, but by how the media portrayed her. It wasn't just policies or debates that drove public opinion, but the relentless focus on her tone, her expression, and her supposed "coldness." Clinton was constantly being picked apart for being "scripted," "untrustworthy," or "too ambitious," while Donald Trump was being painted as [authentic and unfiltered](#).

It's important to note that these portrayals didn't emerge organically from voters. They were constructed and repeated by the media.

When the FBI declined to press charges after investigating Clinton's use of a private email server, Fox News ran headlines like "Clinton Gets Off the Hook." The New York Times, often viewed as a liberal outlet, still leaned into the "trust" narrative, questioning her authenticity and framing her demeanor as calculated. Even when the controversy ended, the framing didn't.

Polling data shows the damage. Pew reported a 9-point drop from 58% to 49% in [Clinton's favorable ratings](#) after the FBI announcement, even though she had been cleared. Gallup found [similar declines in favorability](#). The same never happened to Trump. He [survived Access Hollywood and a stream of scandals with minimal dips in support](#), still having 40% of the country supporting him. The media treated their flaws differently—and so did the public.

When I ran a comparative analysis of the media tone from Fox News and New York Times against the public opinion data from the 2016 election, a clear pattern emerged. As Fox News ramped up its negative coverage from June to August 2016, Clinton's poll numbers fell almost in parallel. The New York Times showed a subtler increase in criticism, but the impact

compounded. When the media collectively reinforces the same doubts, even with different rhetoric, it creates a lasting impression: that this woman can't be trusted to lead.

That pattern hasn't disappeared. This past year, Kamala Harris was described in a similar manner, getting called "[very scripted](#)" and so on. What's called decisive in a man becomes divisive in a woman. And while we've made gains in representation, the executive branch remains a glass ceiling thickened by narrative. Will society ever be accepting of women stepping into one of the highest positions in the world?

Not until things change—namely, the way media frames women in power.

We need to start naming this for what it is: structural media bias. [Political journalism doesn't just report elections](#)—it shapes them. And when the framing of female candidates is filtered through outdated expectations of warmth, likability, and tone, it distorts democracy.

Journalists must take responsibility for how they frame leadership. Voters must challenge the stories that they're being told. When a woman candidate is described as "calculating," ask if a man would be called "strategic." When she's criticized for her tone, ask whose ears are being protected.

In 2016, we didn't just lose a candidate. We lost a moment to reckon with how media bias undermines democracy. Until we change how we talk about women in power, we'll keep seeing the same results every four years: glass ceilings, media distortions, and missed opportunities for history to be made.

*Based at UC Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies, the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends approximately 30 Cal students to the state's capital every summer for eight-week public service internships. The Jo Freeman Women in Politics Fellowship supports Cal-in-Sac Fellows whose individual research projects focus on women in politics, including research on public policies that affect women.