

BOOK REVIEW

Women, Media, and Elections: Representation and Marginalization in British Politics. By Emily Harmer. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021. 212 pp. \$139.95 (cloth). ISBN: 9781529204940.

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Central to modernity is the belief in linear progress, or the idea that we are on a continuous path of improvement moving in only one direction: forward. A cursory glance at the social and political history of the past 100 years would seem to suggest that conditions for women in the United Kingdom have gradually improved, from winning the right to vote and stand for election in 1918, to gaining (in theory) equal pay and action on gendered discrimination with the *Equal Pay Act 1970*, the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975*, and, more recently, the *Equality Act 2010*. The number of women in the House of Commons increased during these decades, with the percentage of women members of Parliament finally reaching double digits after the 1997 election. The United Kingdom also elected its first two women prime ministers, Margaret Thatcher (1979–90) and Theresa May (2016–19). Considering such progress, it might then be reasonable to ask: has the media representation of women politicians likewise improved?

This question is at the heart of Emily Harmer's *Women, Media, and Elections*. Engaging deeply with the gendered mediation thesis—the idea that political reporting conventions are gendered and that the “masculinist norms of the news industry” (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996, 114) present men as the norm while othering women—Harmer comprehensively traces and compares electoral coverage of women in U.K. elections from 1918 to 2017. She notably cautions that it is “tempting for feminist media scholars to assume that news texts have always portrayed women in similar ways to contemporary reportage, or that their representation [has] improved over time,” arguing that, so far, this has been “unproven [yet] remains implicit” (14) in the literature. Questioning this “rather lazy assumption that things must be getting better for women in our society,” Harmer establishes a need for historical research to “place newer elections (and these assumptions) into context” (29).

The book is sectioned into four main chapters, each exploring one group of political women: women candidates, women relatives of politicians, women

voters, and women leaders. In these four chapters, Harmer systematically shows how the news media actively uphold a masculinized idea of politicians and politics through gendered representations that undermine and “other” women from the political realm. The mixed-method approach makes for a particularly stimulating read as the use of qualitative examples to locate quantitative data within a certain era enlivens the narrative with contextual detail, and it is well suited for a longitudinal analysis.

Chapter 2, dedicated to the reportage of women politicians and candidates, unsurprisingly reveals how negative and personalized coverage acts to portray the latter as women first, politicians second. Countering the idea of linear progress underlying the assumption that “things must be getting better,” Harmer identifies an increase in “misogynistic language aimed at politicians” (46) as well as negative evaluations more broadly. Notably, her qualitative analysis in fact exposes a shift in the news media from merely observing the sexism that women candidates endure from voters and opponents to “the newspapers themselves becom[ing] the main propagators of sexist tropes” (49). Similarly, in Chapter 5, Harmer examines the news coverage of women party leaders during five electoral campaigns (1979, 1983, 1987, 2015, and 2017) to determine whether they received different gendered coverage than women candidates and whether a change in representation could be found over time. Harmer finds that women candidates received quantitatively more gendered coverage than women leaders, which suggests that “increasing women’s presence as leaders does not serve to normalise women in political coverage as a whole” (133).

As Harmer notes in her introductory chapter, scholars of gendered mediation and elections tend to focus on women candidates or leaders rather than women relatives of politicians or women voters. Yet, as Harmer makes clear, these two groups are useful for gendered media research because their mediated representation “goes a long way to determining how both the public and political elites alike conceive of who matters in formal politics” (157). Chapters 3 and 4 accordingly address this oversight. Chapter 3, on women voters, reveals that media coverage has remained relatively stable since 1918, aside from a few subtle shifts. Women voters have been portrayed predominantly as mothers and housewives whose political motivations are shaped entirely by a familial role. Though this trend waned in the mid-twentieth century, it made a resurgence following Thatcher’s electoral victory. Women voters, Harmer argues, have in recent decades been inaccurately depicted as a politically unengaged and homogenous group, restricting their position in mainstream political discourse and thereby demonstrating “how crucial it is to monitor the representation of women over time” (90).

In Chapter 4, focusing on women relatives of politicians, Harmer shows that their coverage—like that of leaders and candidates—has become increasingly hostile. In line with the presidentialization of politics in Westminster systems, there has been an increasing preference for stories covering spouses of party leaders over other women relatives. There has also been a gradual move from stories presenting spouses as active campaigners on the political trail, to supportive (but passive) companions, and, finally, to little more than “symbols of

their husbands' political prowess" and points of access into a (male) leader's private family life (111).

By presenting a carefully curated collage of women's experiences over 100 years, *Women, Media, and Elections* is a timely reminder to guard against complacency. In her concluding lines, Harmer critiques studies of election coverage that ignore the gendered mediation literature, considering it "too niche" to be worth including. This has widespread consequences: important data that could explain changing election coverage are not recorded, gendered differences are overlooked, women's perspectives are excluded, and men are reinforced as "the default citizens and political representatives" (173). Harmer argues, quite rightly, that such scholarly oversights are ultimately damaging for our democracy; therefore, it is to these scholars above all that I recommend this book as a crucial read.

The biggest strength of *Women, Media, and Elections* lies in its longitudinal analysis, interrogating the myth of linear progress by exposing how media treatment of women in elections is not getting better and, in many ways, is becoming more sexist and hostile. Harmer reveals that the trends of gendered coverage have either remained consistent or have waxed and waned in an almost cyclical manner in an important corrective to the modern Eurocentric perspective of time in favour of nonlinearity. This serves as a powerful reminder that the path to progress and equality is not a linear one, as is often assumed, but rather one marked by constant pressure and action.

Reference

Sreberny-Mohammadi, Annabelle, and Karen Ross. 1996. "Women MPs and the Media: Representing the Body Politic." *Parliamentary Affairs* 49 (1): 103–15.

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