

THE WOMEN WHO WANTED TO BE PRESIDENT IN 2020
AND THE MEDIA WHO WATCHED THEM

by

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AND THE MEDIA WHO WATCHED THEM

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ABSTRACT

Women have, and continue to be, underrepresented in political positions of power, and politics as a whole. This study compares the variation between how the men and women who ran for the Democratic Presidential Nomination were evaluated by news media outlets when they withdrew their candidacy. The dataset consisted of seven news outlets that were chosen by meeting both cross referencing a Pew Research Institute study and a Forbes ranking of face-based outlets in addition to other selection criteria. Seven candidates, Bernie Sanders, Kamala Harris, Elizabeth Warren, Pete Buttigieg, Cory Booker, Amy Klobuchar, and Andrew Yang, who all met a debate invitation threshold were chosen to be part of this study. Once gathered, the data was coded using a sentiment approach and a set of original rules detailed in the attached appendix. The findings show that there was not a significant difference between the male and female presidential candidates when examining the modifiers or normative judgements used to describe the candidate's withdrawals from the primary election, but even the slight variations can be used to advance understanding of the relationship between media, gender, and politics.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincerest thanks to Dr. Schiffer, my thesis advisor, who extended unconditional wisdom and humanity towards me. Additionally, I give gratitude to the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Green and Dr. Iba, who provided helpful feedback during this process. I fervently thank my friends and family who patiently listened as I navigated this process. Lastly, though they will not see this acknowledgement, I would like to thank the women who donned the title of “first” in any position they assumed; here’s to a future where there will be no more “firsts” for women, only seconds and thirds, and so on.

Introduction

If the likes of Ida B. Wells, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or Lucy Burns could see the progress that women have made in occupying spaces previously occupied solely by men, one would imagine that they'd be pleased to see the results of their efforts. After all, women hold more positions as state legislatures, governors, and in Congress than they ever have before. One position that women have yet to claim is that of President of the United States, and it's not for lack of trying. In recent years, the country has witnessed attempts to disrupt this trend such as the notable campaign and democratic nomination of Hillary Clinton in 2008 and 2016 respectively, and more recently the six women who made presidential bids for the 2020 Democratic Party Presidential Nomination. Still, these bids have fallen short of their goal: electing a woman for president. Given that women make up about 50% of the world's population and 50% of the population of the United States, it seems unlikely that there is not at least one woman among the millions who is qualified to be President of the United States. Outside of the United States, other countries have successfully elected women to their highest political positions such as New Zealand, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Estonia, and Iceland, to name a few.

Countless factors influence a candidate's success such as campaign finance, name recognition, organization, speaking events, advertising, prior experience, time in office, positions held, public polling, and perhaps most important to a candidate's success is how they are depicted in the media. The media, a broad and often misunderstood group, is defined in this study as a non-partisan group across broadcast, print, and radio. By nature of what they do, the media both reflect and set the tone of what they cover. Their role as watchdogs means they dutifully cover government officials and affairs in an attempt to maintain transparency with the

public. When it comes to election season, the media acts as the bridge between the candidates and the public who more than likely will never meet the candidates.

To help audiences understand what a candidate is really like, a reporter may use descriptive words when talking about said candidate or their campaign. However, what words and how a reporter describes a candidate will inevitably be influenced by their implicit biases. Unintentionally, a journalist may speak favorably of one group while judging another more harshly for a perhaps similar performance. Studies have shown that the media has historically written about women in politics in a different way than men and as more women run for political office, I believe it crucial to know how women are being judged in comparison to their male counterparts and if so, whether that might be a reason a woman has yet to be elected president. Taking all of that into consideration, I ask — *how does the tone of media outlets vary when writing about the men who withdrew their candidacy for the 2020 Democratic Party Presidential Nomination compared to the women?*

Literature Review

Media and politics

Two of the most visible occupations often intersect and feed off of one another in a 21st century version of checks and balances in which they both check and they both balance. The media came under a intensified slew of hate and attacks under the Trump Administration. As they were both trying to check one another at the same time, both suffered as onlookers watched in disappointment and fear of what the future may hold. However strange and unprecedented times may seem, literature and history can attest to the media's ability to withstand trials so long as it sticks to the core of its mission.

The cries of media bias have not subsided since I was a research assistant studying that very phenomenon and if anything, they may have gotten louder. Luckily, many scholars have dove into work to defend what it is that the media does so well which is tell the full news. Though this study seeks identify variations or surplus media involvement, it is clear that it is not the job, nor should it be, of the media to stay entirely objective and unbiased. A helpful test described to me by a Dr. Adam Schiffer, my former political science professor and soon to be former thesis advisor, is the, “is it raining?” test that he puts into practice in his recently published scholarly work¹. Hypothetically, a person who was outside all day tells you it was raining but someone who had been inside tells you that it wasn’t — do you take both perspectives and report on them without checking yourself? No, at some point you have to go and see for yourself and tell the truth. Now, switch those hypothetical people with Democrats and Republicans. Sometimes, somebody is objectively wrong and it is the job of the media to tell the truth. In fact, “news is data in context,” and, “it is the truth about the facts” (American Press Institute) so more often than not, as someone who has committed themselves to seeking the truth and reporting it, it is a journalist’s job to look out the window or add a word because it would make what they’re saying true, and the pursuit of truth is at the heart of journalism. Though this study may seem like its aim is to keep tally of all the times the press oversteps, I am simply observing how they watch the rain.

Media, gender, and politics

An even more expansive field is one that seeks to understand media, gender, and politics while it transforms nearly every day. This is another well explored subject that may need no further exploration but is indeed changing as new social media platforms surge in popularity,

¹ It is titled, “Teaching Media Bias: The Case of the Trump Presidency”

political candidates rise to stardom or fall to scandal, and we watch it all. Due to the nature of its expansiveness, patterns can be difficult to predict or may not exist at all because of the fluidity and pace at which it changes. One might think that gender relations and acceptance has gotten better in more recent years as the farther we move from the past the more it can seem like the dark ages of ignorance, but that may not be so.

Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May, two powerful women years apart, were afflicted by the same gender limiting lens that is visible today. However, what Blair Williams, a graduate student in Australia, found was that Margaret Thatcher received less gender specific media coverage than Theresa May despite Theresa May being in power in recent years². Through careful analysis and intentional choices in what she considered to be “gendered language” Williams assessed the conditions both women were subject to as being at the cross section of the media, politics, all while being a woman. Specifically, I admire how Williams defines gendered language when she’s looking for it to be either one of three things: comments about one’s appearance, familial role, or demeanor. Williams then goes into greater detail about what variance she looked for specifically which if applied to a politician in the United States, I wonder how they’d fare. Unlike Williams, I am not seeking to understand the disparities over time from one woman who was the head of government to the next because living in America has not afforded me that luxury. Instead, I will just try to see how far we have to go.

Theory

In gender studies, there is this idea that white men are the genderless, raceless group who are able to move in and out of spaces unnoticed and without inhibition because they are the default. When you ask someone to think of a race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, whatever

² *A Tale of Two Women: A Comparative Gendered Media Analysis of UK Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May*

it may be, odds are that they won't say white, straight, able-bodied man because it almost seems too obvious to say, that's the norm after all. Belonging and living and learning in a world that subscribes to a gender binary means not only is there a right and wrong way to do gender, but there is a better way. Hegemonic masculinity and Freud-anatomy want people to believe that one's body is their destiny and that among bodies there is a hierarchy. These pervasive schools of thought bleed into the images we see on a daily basis through advertising and movies and the messages we receive when shopping for clothes or hygiene products.

Two theories in communication studies that further this idea of a one true right body or way to be are homosocial reproduction and homosocial preservation; both are the desire to be around and to maintain an environment of homogeneity because predictability brings people comfort. Specifically, homosocial reproduction is the desire to surround ourselves with people who look like us and homosocial preservation is the act of maintaining an environment of homogeneity. Structuration theory walks alongside homosocial reproduction and preservation and says that the structures that are in place in society frame it in such a way that when we continue to engage in them, it preserves and reproduces them.

All that to say that as a society who still largely subscribes to hegemonic masculinity and the rules and restrictions that the gender binary demands because it is what we are familiar and comfortable with, we are actively preserving that to be the norm. Hegemonic masculinity, structural theory, and homosocial reproduction have all worked in tandem to train people to expect to see men in positions of power because that is the way it has always been and that is the way people want it to continue to be so that they feel comfortable. From the Founding Fathers to every major athlete, politician, authority figure, and everything in between, our society has

placed men at the forefront of our eyes and minds, what would happen if someone tried to change it now?

Role incongruity and traitorous identity threaten harsh punishment for any who wish to challenge the status quo or not conform to the agreed upon rules of the hegemonic beliefs. Every aforementioned topic or theory has poised individuals to react negatively to anything that deviates from the norm, with the chance that it could be subject to harsh scrutiny for doing so. If someone were to dare to break through sacred norms, perhaps a woman tries to run for a powerful political position, an observer's underlying uncertainty reduction theory may sound the alarm to try to make sense of what they're seeing. Our minds and bodies wish to feel comfort and in order to do that they will come up with reasons why something that appears different may in fact just be wrong, and what to do or think to feel more at ease and reaffirmed that we are actually the ones in the right.

Being faced with the competing thoughts that accompany cognitive dissonance in the face of something new is likely to ignite a flight or fight reaction in someone that could lead to some sort of language cognitive structuring in an effort to make sense of the unfamiliarity someone is confronted with. Language cognitive structuring, or restructuring perhaps, is the act of using language to change the message to better fit what we want to hear or say. Instead of, "she almost won" one could say, "she narrowly lost"; a small change, but one that makes a difference in how you view the subject of that hypothetical competition.

As a result of all of that, and more, I believe it will take a large paradigm shift for everyone to be completely comfortable with seeing women strive for powerful positions in which they lead, make tough decisions, and are given respect. Though the female candidates

withdrew, that they attempted to cross into a territory previously, and currently, held by men might be cause enough for additional judgement. Therefore, I hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: More modifiers/normative judgement will be used when female candidates suspended their campaign than when male candidates suspended theirs.

Data and Research Method

Before any data could be gathered, two important decisions had to be made first: what candidates would be included, from what media outlets, and then why. First, I developed criteria for which outlets to gather news from. Developing the criteria required intentional thought and future oriented thinking in order to choose the outlets that would produce data that could accurately sufficiently answer my research question. In searching for reputable news outlets, I stumbled upon two lists, one from Pew Research Center and one from Forbes, that studied public perspective on various media outlets and gave a list of ten face-based news sources respectively. Both websites are reputable sources that I used to cross reference with one another, in addition to applying the rules I developed³, to produce my list of news sources that I would use to gather my data. The criteria narrowed the population to seven sources: NPR, Politico, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Politico, CBS, NBC, and ABC.

The next decision, what candidates to include in the study, was crucial. As previously mentioned, campaign finance and polling data are a large part of any election process and can be viewed as indicators of the health of a candidate's campaign. Instead of choosing just one threshold, I decided instead to utilize whether a candidate was invited to participate in the democratic debates as the qualifier for whether they would be included in my data. Over the

³ See Appendix A for news outlet criteria

course of the primary season, the Democratic Party held 11 total debates, with the last being between just Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders. In order to be part of my data, candidates had to meet the threshold of qualifying for at least five debates, roughly half, which left Bernie Sanders, Kamala Harris, Elizabeth Warren, Amy Klobuchar, Cory Booker, Pete Buttigieg, and Andrew Yang to be included in my study. In sum, seven candidates and seven news outlets led me to a sample of 49 articles to read and code.

The most crucial and personally contentious aspect of this research was identifying the variation and how to measure it. After reading several articles, it became clear that when a candidate withdraws their candidacy, journalists often take this opportunity to provide commentary on what they think went right, what went wrong, perhaps flex their knowledge of the horserace, and they rush to do it. The easiest decision of all was to keep the timeframe to the 24 hours after a candidate announced the suspension of their campaign as that is when the bulk of stories are written. Since each candidate was partaking in the same activity, it was necessary to identify a similarity but one that had the potential to vary among candidates and words that are used to gauge the success or failure of a candidate came to mind. In large part thanks to prior research, I began thinking of words as normative judgement statements and tried to identify any time a judgement was passed onto a candidate. The candidates and the news outlets were used as independent variables, while variation in evaluative words would be the dependent variable.

I then developed the rules that would be used for coding⁴. The first time, I read through the article without identifying any modifiers. The next time I read the article, I would highlight all modifiers in the same color. Then, the third time I read the article I highlighted words or phrases as being positive or negatively connotated based on the set of coding rules I developed

⁴ See Appendix B for coding guidelines

after much deliberation, research, trial and error, and time. upon meanings of said words, thus signaling my use of the sentiment approach. If a highlighted word was positive, it would be highlighted in green, neutral was yellow, and negative red. The number of green, yellow, and red per article per candidate was recorded and then calculated to find averages and proportions of a certain kind of sentiment out of the total sentiments utilized towards a candidate or by a single publication. Once I gathered all of my data, I compared it in a multitude of ways to understand what the data meant.

I chose to use human coding because there was too large a variety of words to be able to tell R what words to detect, as well as whether a word is positive or negative is slightly subjective in this case. As I began reading the articles, it was apparent to me as well that the context within which words were placed also had a large impact on how I perceived them. Furthermore, as I was coding the articles the first time through, I would develop new rules when I saw a phrase or a modifier that I hadn't come upon before and I enjoyed the flexibility of being able to modify my rules as I went. Lastly, there is a manageable amount of data that it is not overwhelming for human coders to read through all of it. I chose the sentiment approach to guide my coding as I believe the emotions attached to words are a way for journalists to pass judgment onto a candidate and their campaign, and how much judgement is passed onto a candidate can be said to speak to the level of scrutiny they felt during their withdrawal (one can infer about the campaign as a whole, but it is not necessarily accurate to do so). If it appeared that women were judged more harshly when partaking in the same event as men, withdrawing their candidacy, it may be reasonable to assume that there is still a gender bias in the news media.

Findings and Analysis

In short, the data I found provided no dramatic evidence that there was a noticeable or even substantial difference between the amount of negative, neutral, and/or positive modifiers used when describing a female candidate and her campaign and a male candidate and his campaign. It might be easy to right off this data because it did not directly prove or disprove my hypothesis, but a lot can be learned still. Understanding the media's tendencies by witnessing what the data produced will become increasingly important as more women seek to assume positions of leadership which we know to be certain when one looks at the current trend of female representation in positions of power.

Due to the kind of data that was produced, it was able to be manipulated in different ways which lent itself to different insights about the topic. To clarify, the colors of the different pieces of the pie graph correlate with the ones I used when highlighting and coding my data. The greatest difference between parallel sentiments between the genders is about 4.3%, with women experiencing more negative modifiers in articles written about them, and the smallest difference at 2% between neutral modifiers for men and women. The difference between negative and positive is much greater for female candidates than it is for male, at a 8.2% difference compared to 1.6% difference.

In Figure 1, a large gap can be seen in how The Washington Post wrote about the men who suspended their campaigns giving them 10% more positive coverage than women who did the same thing⁵. Of course, there is so much context to be taken into consideration about the candidate's progress because maybe they were deserving of more poor coverage, or one of the male candidates did something phenomenal, who knows. Campaigning is an ancient art that

⁵ See Appendix C for a further breakdown of the data

more or less has a lot of the same aspects, no matter who is running. That these candidates took part in the same process that ended in similar ways yet they received a 10% difference in positive evaluations is something to think about.

Figure 1

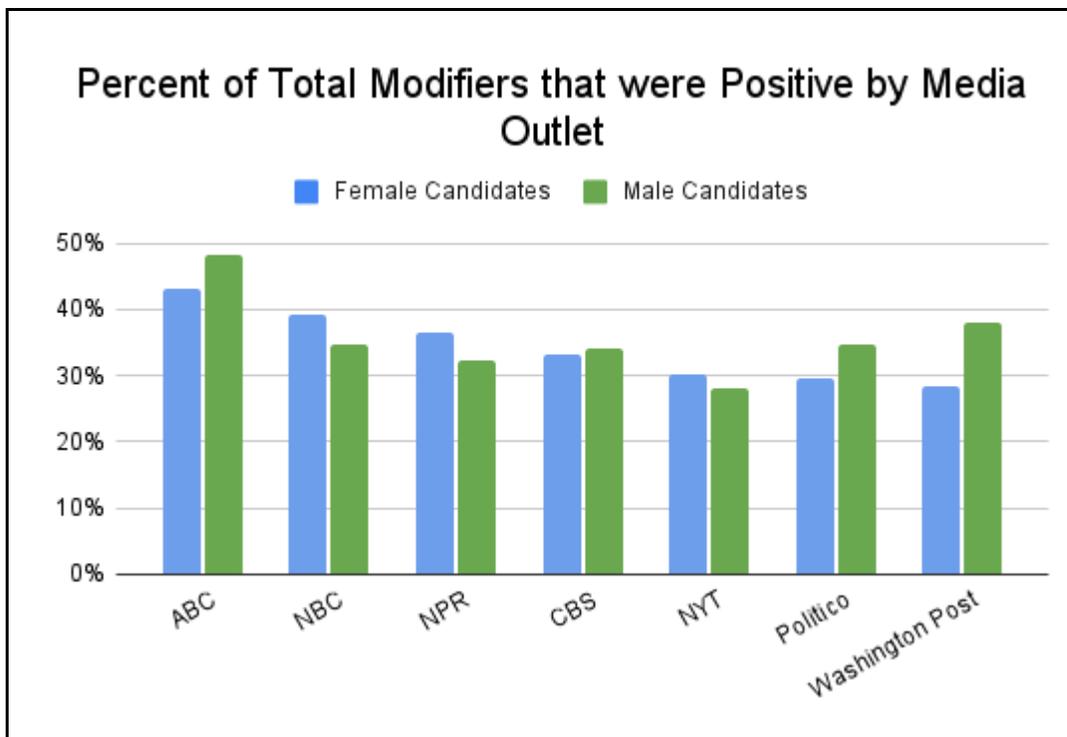
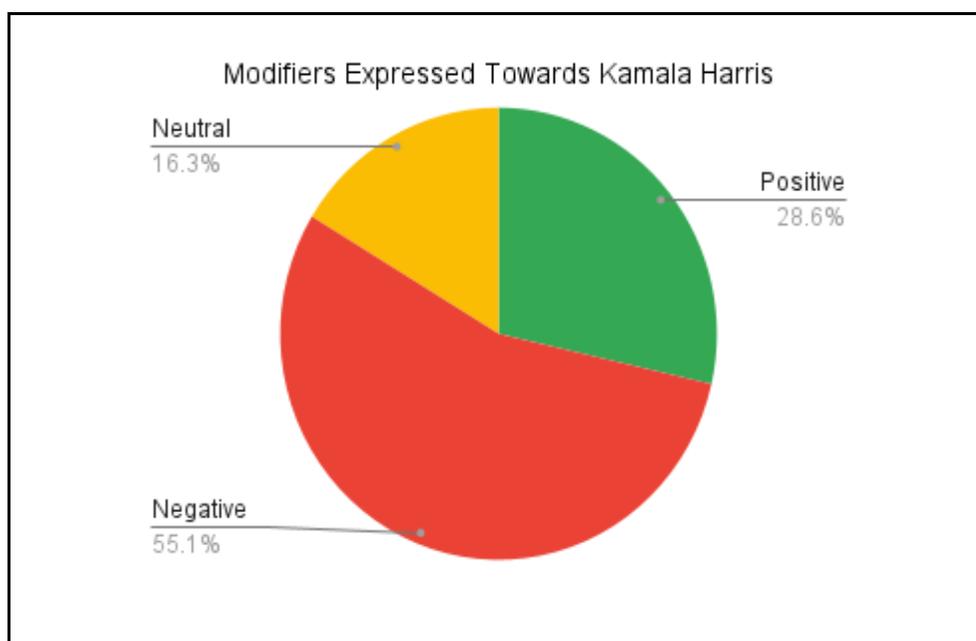


Figure 1

Figure 2 at first glance also doesn't seem to be earth shattering but when thinking about this in the context of the theories that were previously mentioned, this graph takes on a whole new meaning. Without a doubt, Kamala Harris received the most negative coverage of the candidates in this study, and this graph, as well as those in the appendix, can show that. However, the candidate who received the most criticism and negative modifiers now assumes the office of the Vice-President, the first woman in history to do so. In considering the gender and communication theories of before, it is possible that Vice-President Harris received harsher scrutiny for a reason other than just withdrawing her candidacy?

Figure 2



Figure

Figure 3

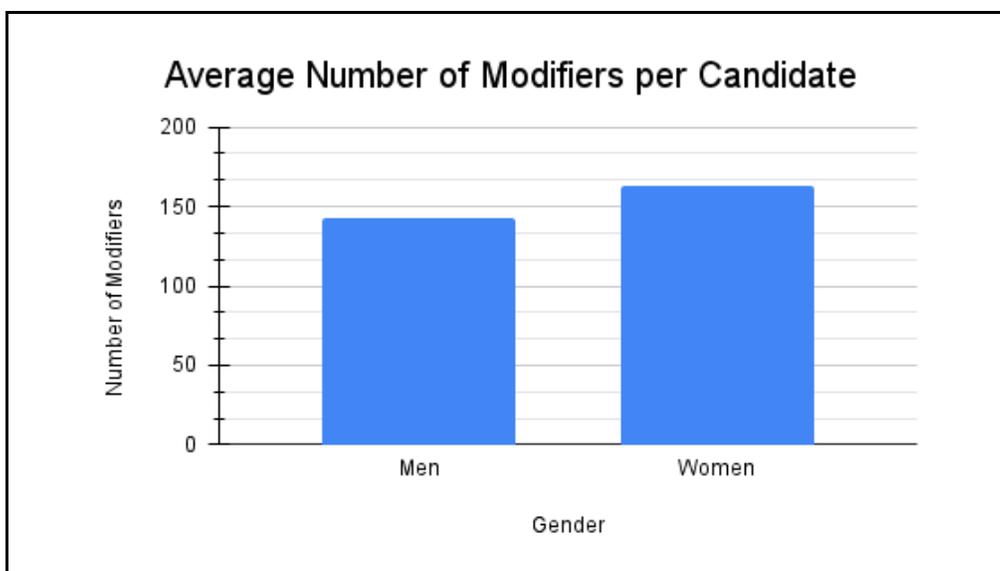


Figure 3

Figure 3 stops just short at answering my thesis as it showcases that the three women in the study received more, and a good deal more, modifiers on average than their male counterparts. Granted, modifiers in this study did include positive affirmations and reactions from the press, but in this context it is less about the content of the evaluations and more important to understand that regardless of whether it was good or bad, on average these women were being judged more than their male counterparts. The heat from the magnifying glass of being one of the first or only of your kind is the price many people have paid to have a shot at saving someone else from that same heat someday.

Conclusion

In summary, the data does not show a stark divide or difference between the tone used or judgement passed when discussing the men who ran for the democratic nomination, and then withdrew their candidacy, compared to the women who did the same. Though no correlation can be proven between the data found and a direct impact on the success or failure of each candidate, news media undoubtedly plays a large role in how we understand politics and make sense of the

political nomination processes. No longer is it enough to disavow a woman's desire to lead; we must do more than cry out for representation, we must be consciously aware of the barriers that hold individuals back if we truly wish to have equitable representation. The intersection of politics, gender, and the media is a well-established and longstanding relationship that still has so much more to be discovered and explored. Whether there's more research or not, I hope it brings about a Madam President one day.

A strength of any research that works to understand how gender, media, and politics interact with one another is that there will never be a shortage of content and something can always be learned. Personally, the explicit "rules" for coding and choosing candidates and news outlets worked well in the context of my data and though it did not produce what I anticipated, that I learned something is enough for me. For those wanting to pursue similar work or take this one step further, it would further our understanding on the current state of women in politics if someone were to do a similar study on when each candidate announced their presidency. Especially for those who are convinced that there is overt gender bias and they want to be the one to find it, announcing a candidacy has the potential to produce such findings. Unlike when a candidate withdraws, announcing a run for the White House is a candidate's first debut on this new, grand platform so reporters will rush to define them and pin them down so they can tell their audiences exactly who is on their TVs. That eagerness to define someone has the potential to lead to overgeneralizations, the occasional stereotype here or there, and may make for an interesting read. In my opinion, whoever decides to do it won't have to worry about a woman being elected President any time soon.

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Appendix A

Criteria for choosing news outlets:

- Started with lists from Pew Research Center and Forbes, cross-referenced and only chose the outlets they had in common. Left with:
 - NPR
 - ABC
 - CBS
 - Politico
 - NBC
 - New York Times
 - Time Magazine
 - The Washington Post
 - The Atlantic
 - USA Today
 - The Associated Press
 - BBC
 - The Economist
 - Fox
 - Brietbart
 - Bloomberg
- Not international since this is an American election and I think it's important to study and understand the way American based news sources interact with the candidates.
 - ~~BBC~~
 - ~~The Economist~~
- Not a wire outlet like the Associated Press since other publications sometimes adopt their stories in lieu of writing their own.
 - ~~The Associated Press~~
- Not overtly partisan because I want to try to have as many control variables as I can to isolate the variation, and having different political parties could skew the data.
 - ~~Brietbart~~
 - ~~Fox News~~
- Not business/financial based because I wanted the priority to be general and/or political news.
 - ~~Bloomberg~~
- Not based on popularity among the public and/or public trust as the data found in the aforementioned Pew Research Center study found clear evidence that public opinion on news media is incredibly fickle, and much of the distrust is being led by Republican forces (which again, would bring political affiliation into account and impact the data).

- Finally, and most importantly, each news outlet would have had to have written a story about each candidate within the time frame I was examining.
 - ~~The New Yorker~~
 - ~~The Atlantic~~
 - ~~Time Magazine~~
 - ~~USA Today~~
- After I applied these rules, I was left with seven news outlets: National Public Radio, The New York Times, The Washington Post, ABC, NBC, CBS, and Politico.

Appendix B

Coding Guidelines:

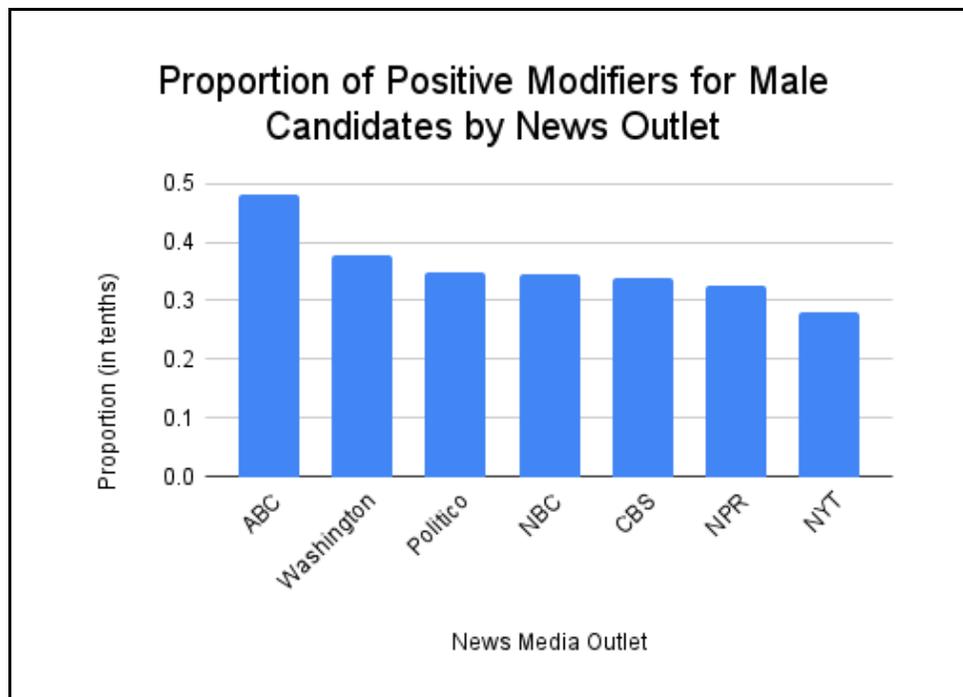
In order to be fair and consistent when reading through the different articles, I developed a set of guidelines to refer back to as I was coding. They are as follows:

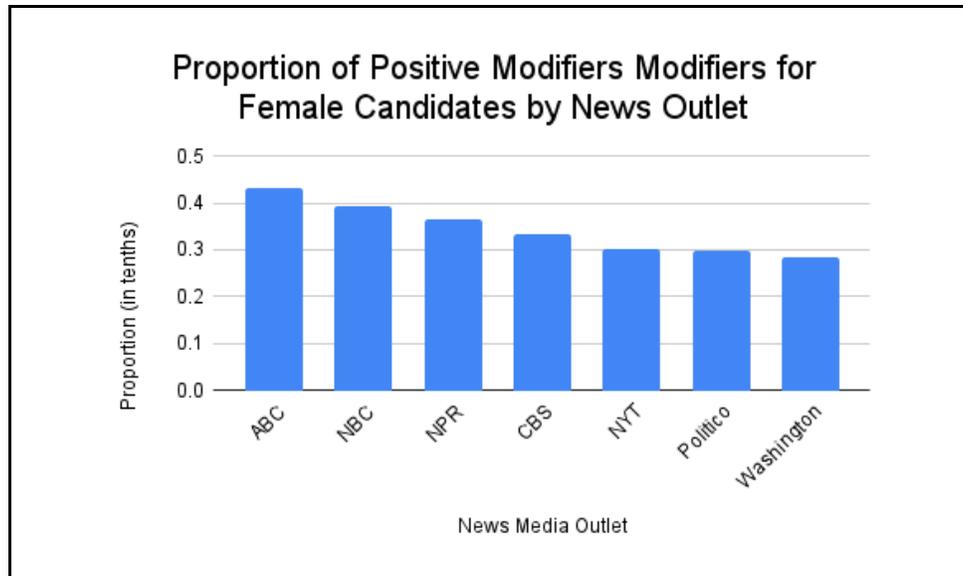
- Begin by identifying statements of passing judgement such as adverbs/adjectives and/or modifiers when talking about the candidate or their campaign.
 - Examples: Not just a win, a ____ win.
- Start when the main body of the article begins, not the subtitle or heading
- Be sure it is the journalist's own commentary and they are not quoting someone else
- If a modifier has a positive connotation, highlight in green
 - Examples: clear front-runner, strong performance, surge of momentum
- If a modifier has negative connotation, highlight in red
 - Examples: evaporating funds, struggled deeply
- If a modifier has a neutral and/or mixed connotation, highlight in yellow
 - Examples: backhanded compliment such as, "rose from relative obscurity"
 - The candidate rose, which is a positive statement, but relative obscurity would be red so together they "cancel out".
 - Or, a statement that adds its own commentary, but the commentary is neither bad nor good.
- Givens:
 - Negative (red): struggled, failed, just or only when describing quantities,
 - Yellow (neutral): shock, surprise,
- Reminders:
 - Take it on a case by case basis as a word may be positive in one setting but neutral in the next
 - Bias is inevitable, human error is to be expected
 - Take context into consideration

- Rely on instinct
- Think of the descriptors in the context of politics as something may not be seen as positive to the general public, but is an asset in politics
 - Example: “Elizabeth Warren effectively ended Mike Bloomberg’s candidacy.” (sounds like a bad thing, but is actually good!)
- When unsure, default to yellow/neutral
 - Words such as sought, attempted, tried are yellow.
- Sometimes a single sentence or string of words will have multiple modifiers or judgement statements in it, how many to count depends on if it feels like a separate thought/distinct part from one another.

Appendix C

Figures 4 and 5





Figures 4 and 5

Though ABC maintains its place at the front of top of the y-axis, The Washington Post and Politico dramatically switch from second and third highest proportion of positive modifiers produced to last and second to last once the independent variable changes from male candidates to female candidates.

Figure 6

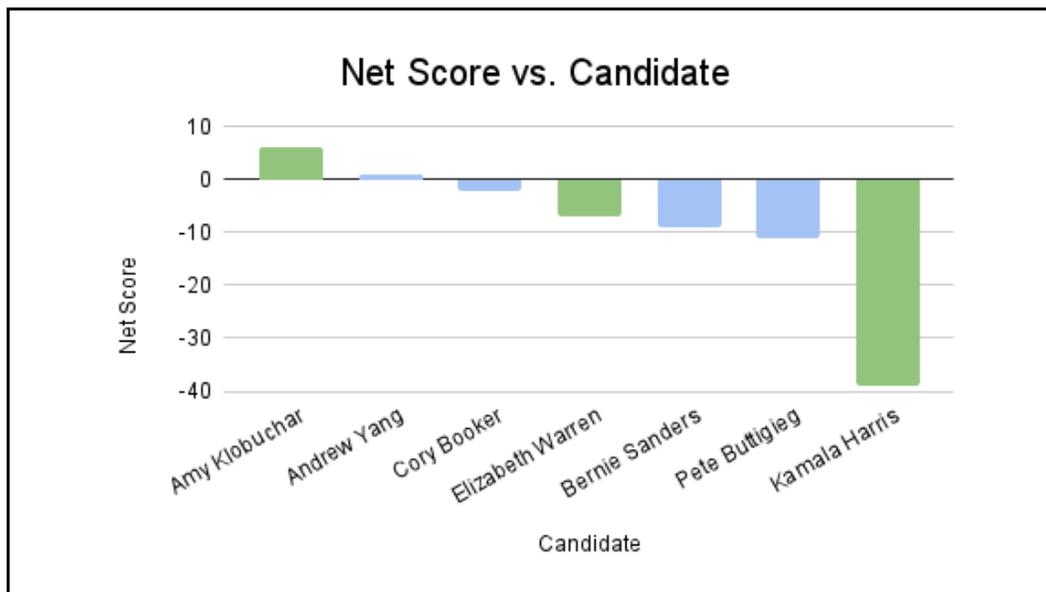
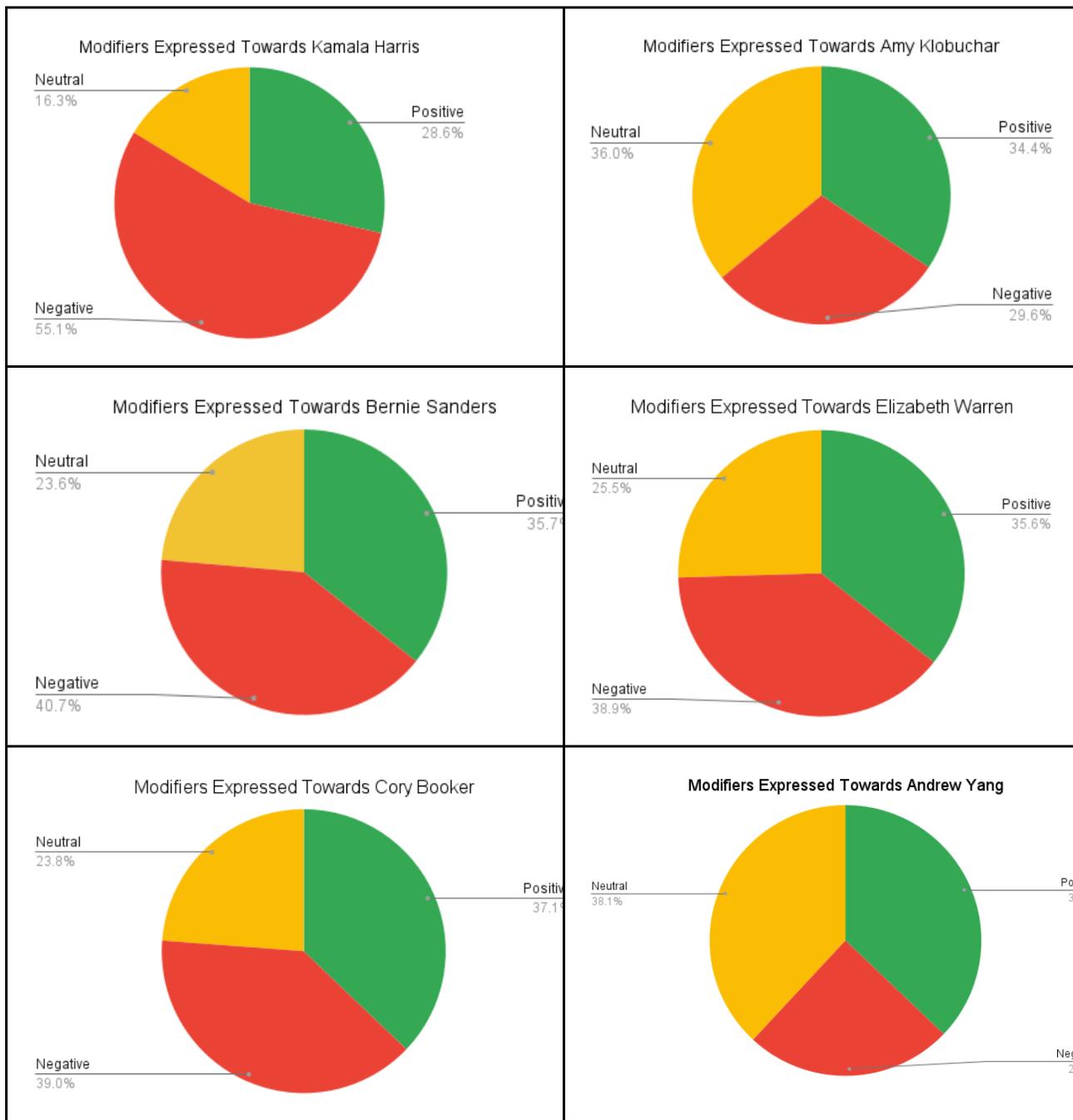
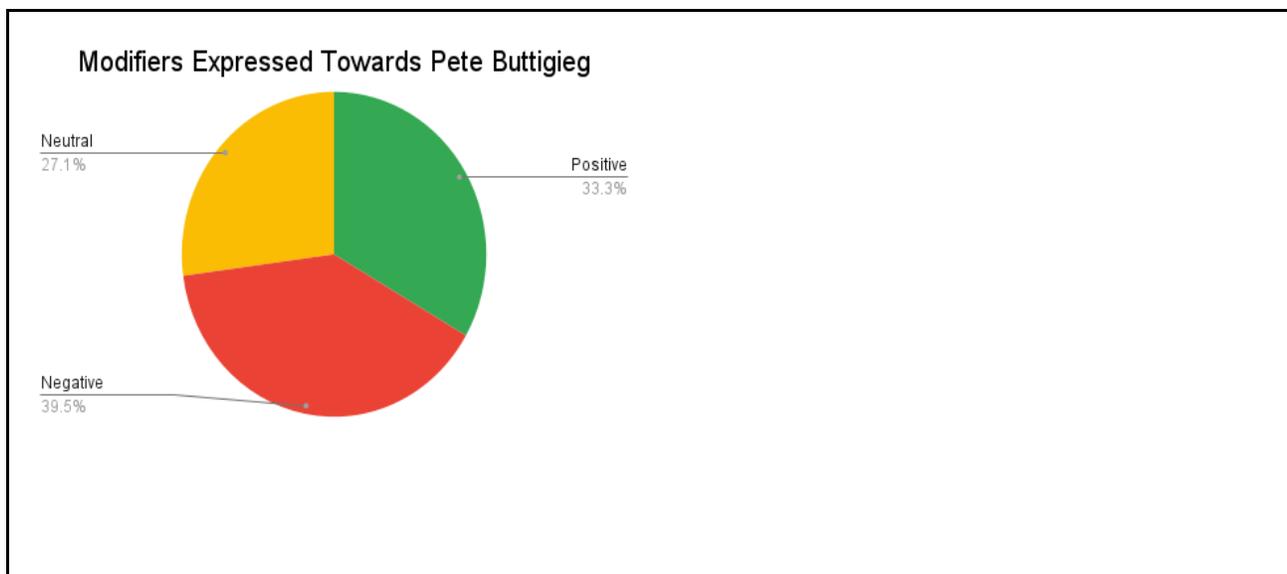


Figure 6

Point of clarification: A score of +1 was awarded to any positive description, -1 to a negative, 0 for neutral statements, and this was done for each article. The sum of each individual article would be taken, and then all seven articles to find the net measure for each candidate.

Figures 7-13





Figures 7-13

These are the breakdowns of what kind of normative judgements/statements were used alongside the telling of each candidate's withdrawal from the Democratic Party Presidential Primary.