Race and Gender in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election: A Content Analysis of Editorial Cartoons

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Previous research has suggested that news and commentary concerning political candidates can vary based on a candidate’s gender or race. Race and gender were especially salient in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. A content analysis of editorial cartoons was conducted to examine patterns in content or imagery related to race and gender. Editorial cartoons that featured Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and/or John McCain and were published during the primary season were analyzed. Cartoons featuring Obama were more likely to be favorable than those featuring the other candidates; those featuring Clinton were more likely to be unfavorable. Clinton was more often presented as ugly and small in size than was Obama. Clinton was shown perpetrating violence more often than the male candidates; she was also portrayed as the recipient of particularly gruesome violence. Some cartoons featured imagery or content that relied on racial or gender stereotypes; a qualitative analysis of these cartoons is provided. Overall, findings support previous research showing the continued relevance of race and gender in media coverage of political campaigns.

Race and gender were particularly salient in the 2008 U.S. Presidential election because, for the first time, the front-runner Democratic candidates were a White woman (Hillary Clinton) and a biracial African American man (Barack Obama). Cultural reaction to the historic demographic characteristics of the two Democratic candidates was the subject of much media scrutiny and commentary. For example, the blog Shakespeare’s Sister (shakesville.com) ran both a Hillary

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Clinton “sexism watch” and a Barack Obama “racism watch,” which noted the most egregious examples of the intense focus on the gender of one candidate and the race of the other. The Clinton sexism watch reached 114 entries before the end of the primaries and included examples such as speculation about a “cat fight” between then-Senator Clinton and Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin in the *New York Times* (Phillips, 2008) and the characterization of Clinton’s laugh as a “cackle,” embodied and demeaned in the Jabber Jaw Pen, which sports her likeness (McEwan, 2008a). The Obama racism watch reached over 100 entries before the November election and included such examples as T-shirts with the slogan “Obama is my slave” (“Obama T-shirt sparks assault,” 2008) and use of the term “tar baby” in a discussion of Obama’s stance on immigration (McEwan, 2008b). That so many blatant examples of both racism and sexism could be easily identified and documented speaks volumes about the continued national unease with powerful men of color and with powerful women of all ethnicities.

Several authors have argued that even the more measured and moderate coverage in mainstream media is a reflection of dominant social constructions and stereotypes of race and gender (Littlefield, 2008; Templin, 1999), and reinforces the “otherness” of candidates of color and candidates who are women. Since voters often have restricted information, voting behavior and perceptions of candidate viability are likely to be heavily influenced by the ways politicians are represented in media outlets. A heavy focus on one aspect of the candidate (gender in the case of Clinton and race in the case of Obama), even when the focus is not overtly sexist or racist, may have far-reaching consequences.

Several studies have shown that the content of media portrayals of candidates is influenced by candidate gender and/or race (e.g., Jeffries, 2002; Kahn, 1994a). Kahn (1993), in a newspaper article content analysis, found less frequent coverage of issues in articles about women, as compared to men, running for the U.S. Senate. Kahn and Goldenberg (1991) found differences in the type of issues associated with candidates, with women more likely than men to be mentioned in discussions of health care, education, and poverty. In contrast, men were more likely to be associated with issues such as the military, the economy, and foreign relations.

A more recent content analysis of newspaper coverage of U.S. Senate and gubernatorial races, in 2000, provided additional information about the gendered nature of news coverage (Bystrom, Robertson, & Banwart, 2001). Although women received a higher level of coverage overall, the candidate’s gender, presence of children, and marital status were much more likely to be mentioned in an article covering a female candidate compared to a male candidate.

Bringing together both content analytic and experimental methods, Kahn (1994b) showed differences in how male and female candidates are reported on, as well as the impact of that differing coverage on experimentally manipulated voter behavior. A content analysis of coverage of gubernatorial and national Senate races showed an advantage for male candidates with more frequent issues coverage. In
addition, women were rated as less viable candidates than men, especially in Senate races. Furthermore, in an experimental paradigm, Kahn showed that participants used female gender stereotypes to evaluate hypothetical female candidates quite often, but did not use male gender stereotypes to evaluate hypothetical male candidates. Moreover, participants who read a newspaper article with coverage typical for a male candidate rated the candidate as more viable than did those participants who read an article with coverage typical for a female candidate. These experimental results support the premise that gendered coverage leads to negative consequences for female candidates.

Data on the influence of race in the coverage of candidates are somewhat more limited than data on gender influence. Jeffries (2002) showed evidence of racial bias in coverage of L. Douglas Wilder’s lieutenant governor and gubernatorial campaigns in Virginia. Using a content analysis of both liberal and conservative newspapers, Jeffries found that a majority of the negative coverage was of the Wilder campaign (i.e., of the African American candidate). Caliendo and McIlwain (2006) reported that coverage of races that include a racial minority candidate mentioned race significantly more than did coverage of all-White races. With regard to the impact of race on voting behavior, the results from some experiments point to the use of implicit racial prejudice in the evaluation process of minority candidates (Terkildsen, 1993).

In contrast to content analysis of newspaper coverage of candidates, which have mostly focused on frequency and valence of coverage, an alternative way to examine the influence of race and gender stereotypes is to examine editorial cartoons. In some ways, this is a challenging task, because the societal role of the editorial cartoonist is primarily criticism, most often through exaggeration and satire, sometimes taken to extremes (Gilmartin & Brunn, 1998; Templin, 1999). However, editorial cartoons may be an ideal place to examine the complex influence of race and gender, precisely because they are a common feature of the landscape, being found daily in a wide variety of media outlets. Moreover, editorial cartoons are highly responsive to current events and, as “opinion” rather than “news,” allow for the expression of both critical and laudatory commentary. In addition, as noted by Gilmartin and Brunn (1998), the visual nature of cartoons results in their ability to “communicate[e] subtle, complex, multilayered messages about people and events . . . messages which would be difficult or impossible to express verbally” (p. 536). The use of humor in editorial cartoons might also make them particularly effective, given that humorous messages have been shown to be more memorable (Schmidt, 1994) and persuasive (Zhang, 1996). Yet in spite of their relevance to an understanding of cultural constructions and discussions of political candidates, only a handful of scholarly analyses of editorial cartoons about political campaigns have been conducted (e.g., Edwards, 2001), and, in general, they do not address either gender or race. One exception is Gilmartin and Brunn (1998), who found that, in an analysis of cartoons related to coverage
of the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women, a common theme was of silencing women. In addition, the majority of the cartoons were not about issues related to the conference, such as the status of women or movement toward equality, but instead centered on messages about China and Chinese repression. Thus, the authors argued that the coverage resulted in the “symbolic annihilation” of women (p. 535), even while reporting on a women’s conference.

Templin (1999) offered another viewpoint in a qualitative analysis of themes used in editorial cartoons to describe Hillary Clinton during Bill Clinton’s presidency. Templin asserted that, as First Lady, Hillary Clinton was subjected to nearly relentless scrutiny that was not only highly negative, but was also vividly sexist. Templin described editorial cartoons casting Mrs. Clinton as usurping President Clinton’s power, emasculating him, and persistently being associated with domestic imagery and themes of embodiment, including a near-obsession with her hair, her reproductive fitness (or lack thereof), and as a highly sexualized being.

Templin (1999) argued that the coverage was out of proportion with the reality of the Clinton presidency, and continued even after Mrs. Clinton purposely kept a much lower profile, suggesting that the coverage was less about her in particular and more about a cultural discomfort with powerful women who break traditional boundaries. In this way, Templin suggests, the editorial cartoonists themselves (nearly all White and male) are forces of the backlash against feminism and other cultural trends that threaten cultural expectations about masculinity and femininity.

Our goals for this study were to conduct a systematic examination of editorial cartoons from the 2008 U.S. presidential election in order to help illuminate the presence of race and gender in the political discourse concerning the election and the candidates. Our study focused on the period of the primary elections (January—June 2008), and included cartoons featuring the three leading (and most frequently drawn) Democratic and Republican candidates: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John McCain. We expected to find that explicit and subtle themes related to gender and race would be present and that they would be more evident in cartoons of Clinton and Obama compared to those of McCain. Based on previous analyses of the portrayal of women (and Hillary Clinton in particular) in editorial cartoons (Gilmartin & Brunn, 1998; Templin, 1999), we expected that Clinton would be portrayed more negatively than either of the two male candidates.

Method

Sample

The website www.gocomics.com provides a comprehensive, centralized archive of comic strips and editorial cartoons, and was used to draw the sample. A total of 54 cartoonists were featured on the website: 46 White men, 4 White women, 1 Asian man, 1 Latino man, and 2 men of unknown ethnicities.
Gocomics.com categorizes editorial cartoonists as conservative, liberal, or moderate; we randomly selected three cartoonists from each of the three categories. Only cartoonists who were actively publishing cartoons during the entire period between January 1, 2008 and June 30, 2008 were eligible for being selected. The cartoonists selected were Chip Bok, Glenn McCoy, and Gary Varvel (conservative), Nick Anderson, Jim Borgman, and Pat Oliphant (moderate), and Joel Pett, Ben Sargent, and Don Wright (liberal); all are White men. All 864 cartoons published on www.gocomics.com by these nine cartoonists during that time period were examined. Every cartoon that featured a visual image of Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, or John McCain was selected for analysis. The final sample included 285 cartoons featuring 366 visual portrayals of candidates (some cartoons featured more than one candidate). The unit of analysis was the candidate.

Coding Categories

Decisions about the type of information to code were based on a review of coding categories used in previous studies (content analyses of media coverage of elections and analyses of editorial cartoons), descriptions of common gender and racial stereotypes, and an initial examination of the content of the cartoons selected. Our codes can be organized into three categories: valence of coverage, gender and race, and violence. These are described below.

Valence

**Overall valence.** An overall code for valence (positive, negative, neutral) of the portrayal of the candidate was assigned. This could be related to the person him/herself (e.g., negative codes for liar or flip flopper, evil, immoral, stupid, inexperienced, incompetent, cowardly; positive codes for integrity, honor, intelligence, competence, being favorably compared to esteemed individuals such as Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, Jr.), issues such as the war in Iraq, the economy or abortion, or the candidate’s chance for winning (with negative codes for indications that the candidate is behind in the polls or is being rejected by voters or the primary process and positive codes for winning state elections or being embraced by voters). Coders were instructed to consider all three of these possibilities to determine an overall valence. If both positive and negative messages were present and seemed to be roughly equal in strength, the code of neutral could be used.

**Other valence codes.** Other codes that represent more specific positive or negative portrayal of candidates included several related to appearance: ugly (noticeably unattractive, over and above the typical exaggeration of features in cartoons), infantilized (portrayed as an infant, child, or adolescent), and size (dramatically smaller or larger than other characters in the cartoon, beyond any slightly
exaggerated actual height differences among candidates). Three codes captured representations of candidates as something sub- or superhuman: animal (the candidate is drawn as an animal other than an elephant or donkey), superhuman (e.g., superhero or angel), and monster (e.g., frightening or evil nonhuman creature or a human being, such as Adolf Hitler, who is universally condemned as deeply evil).

**Gender and Race**

*Stereotypes, racism, and sexism.* Eight codes related to gender and race themes were developed. Race central or gender central were coded whenever a cartoonist drew explicit attention to race or gender (including the racial or ethnic background of the candidate or another person, or race as a concept) or when race or gender themes were implicit, but so central to the cartoon that it would not make sense, or would not be funny, if the character were a different gender or race. Racist or sexist were coded if the cartoon portrayed the candidate him/herself as believing or advancing racial or gender stereotypes, or being willing to exploit the racism or sexism of voters. Gender or racial stereotype were coded as present if the candidate or other people were portrayed in a way that reinforced classic stereotypes. These included (for women): mother, homemaker/domestic, overly sexualized, concerned about physical appearance, ditzy/dumb blonde, ball-busting “bitch,” emotional/crying/sensitive; (for men): aggressive alpha male; breadwinner, and (for African American men) gangster/criminal, urban/inner city, African, athletic, slave, musical (Black minstrel, or rap/hip-hop), poor, or lazy. Gender or racial stereotype reversed were coded for any candidate portrayed as completely reversing one or more stereotypes (e.g., a person represented as the other gender, Clinton portrayed as disliking children).

**Candidate name.** One persistently sexist way that women are treated in media coverage is through the unequal use of first and last names, with women being much more likely than men to be referred to by their first name. For this category, the candidate’s name was coded as (1) not included, (2) first name, initials, or nickname only, (3) last name only, or (4) both first and last name. Because Clinton chose to use her first name as part of campaign materials (e.g., “Hillary ’08” was often her tagline), we ignored names for all candidates when they were clearly meant to represent official campaign slogans and paraphernalia.

**Presence of spouse.** Women candidates are more likely than men to have mention of their marital status included in the coverage they receive (Bystrom et al., 2001). Accordingly, this coding category was used to indicate whether the candidate’s spouse was also represented in the cartoon.
Violence

Because violence against women and ethnic minorities is a serious societal problem, and because more subtle forms of racism and sexism can devolve into violence, we wanted to code for any indications of aggression in the cartoons, including actual physical violence as well as verbal threats or harassment. Violence perpetration by a candidate was coded as present/absent; if present, we coded whether the violence was directed at another candidate, directed at a third party, or directed at both another candidate and a third party. Violence victimization was also coded as present/absent; if present, we coded whether the perpetrator was another candidate, a third party, or both another candidate and a third party.

Coding Reliability

All cartoons were coded by the first author. To compute reliability, we randomly selected 10% of the cartoons drawn by each cartoonist; these were coded by the second author. Interrater agreement was acceptable, ranging from .84 to 1.00. Average agreement for the valence categories was .96, average agreement for the race/gender categories was .95, and average agreement for the violence categories was .95.

Results

Table 1 presents information concerning frequency of codes for each category for each candidate. Cartoons featuring Clinton \((n = 153)\) were about equally numerous as those featuring Obama \((n = 159)\). McCain \((n = 54)\) was featured less frequently.

Valence

**Overall valence.** Tests of the overall valence of the cartoons showed that, across all three candidates, portrayals were more likely to be negative \((n = 260, 71.0\%)\) than positive \((n = 41, 11.2\%)\) or neutral \((n = 65, 17.8\%); \chi^2(2) = 236.51, p < .0001\). However, there was also a statistically reliable difference across candidates, with Clinton having a higher frequency of negative portrayals \((\chi^2(1) = 43.75, p < .0001)\) and a lower frequency of positive portrayals \((\chi^2(1) = 25.88, p < .0001)\) as compared to Obama and McCain. Obama had a higher frequency of positive portrayals \((\chi^2(1) = 33.03, p < .0001)\) and a lower frequency of negative portrayals \((\chi^2(1) = 39.26, p < .0001)\) as compared to the other two candidates.

**Codes related to physical appearance.** The coding system had several categories related to the physical appearance of the candidates, including being
Table 1. Cartoon Coding Category Percentages, by Candidate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Clinton</th>
<th>Obama</th>
<th>McCain</th>
<th>χ² C/O/M</th>
<th>χ² C/O</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of cartoons</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Valence variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall valence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>55.48***</td>
<td>52.08**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same as others</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>93.1</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>13.43**</td>
<td>6.84*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller than others</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bigger than others</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugly/unattractive</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>14.11***</td>
<td>14.35***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infantilized</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrayed as an animal</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrayed as a monster</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.49*</td>
<td>6.36*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrayed as superhuman</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender and race variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse present</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>58.18***</td>
<td>41.50***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>75.55***</td>
<td>49.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First name or initials only</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last name only</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last and first name</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race central</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>12.25**</td>
<td>5.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender central</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>9.73**</td>
<td>8.82**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racist</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race stereotype</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>12.01**</td>
<td>8.92**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender stereotype</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>36.56***</td>
<td>32.11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race reversal</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>2.91*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender reversal</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>23.15***</td>
<td>14.80***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Violence variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence perpetration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None by this candidate</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td>17.88**</td>
<td>4.66+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against another candidate</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against third party</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against candidate and a third party</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence victimization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None for this candidate</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>86.8</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>11.64+</td>
<td>6.36+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By another candidate</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By third party</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By another candidate and a third party</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The first chi-square statistic represents the test for a difference among the three candidates; the second chi-square statistic represents the test for a difference between Clinton and Obama. C = Clinton, O = Obama, M = McCain.

*p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
Portrayed as ugly/unattractive, extreme differences in size as compared to other characters, and being infantilized. Analyses of these categories revealed several patterns. Clinton and McCain were portrayed as ugly more frequently than was Obama; $\chi^2(1) = 13.72$, $p < .001$. McCain was the candidate who was most frequently drawn smaller than other characters in the cartoon. However, of the nine cartoons where this occurred for McCain, five of the comparisons were to large elephants (the symbol of the Republican Party); arguably, this representation is merely an accurate portrayal of the size difference between elephants and humans. Clinton was portrayed as noticeably smaller than other characters more often than was Obama; $\chi^2(1) = 4.52$, $p = .03$. There was no statistically reliable difference in frequency of infantilization across candidates.

**Portrayal as nonhuman.** Three other categories assessed the portrayal of the candidates as nonhuman (or nearly so): as an animal or animal-like, as a monster, devil, or completely evil, and as superhuman or a superhero. Of these, only the differences in frequency of being portrayed as a monster reached standard levels of statistical significance. Although this portrayal appeared only rarely, it is notable that Clinton was the only candidate represented in this way. These portrayals included Wicked Witch of the West (twice), Wicked Witch of the East, a growth on the back of the Democratic Party, a frightening corpse rising from the grave to attack Obama, a living corpse rising from her coffin, and the serial killer Jason from the *Friday the 13th* horror film series (Figure 1).

**Gender and Race**

**Presence of spouse and name usage.** Whereas Bill Clinton was present in 31.4% of the cartoons featuring Hillary Clinton (e.g., Figure 2), the spouses of the two male candidates were rarely (Obama) or never (McCain) featured. This difference between Clinton and the other two candidates was statistically reliable, $\chi^2(1) = 57.73$, $p < .0001$. In cartoons in which the names of candidates were mentioned, Clinton was more frequently referred to by her first name, initials, or a diminutive (e.g., “Hil”) than were the two male candidates, $\chi^2(1) = 51.89$, $p < .0001$. For Clinton, 80.0% of the 65 cartoons that featured her character and included her name referred to her in this way, as opposed to referring to her by her last name (18.5%) or by both her first and last name (1.5%). These frequencies were essentially reversed for the two male candidates. For both Obama (83.7% of 49 cartoons) and McCain (73.5% of 34 cartoons), the vast majority of cartoons featuring these characters and including their names referred to them by last name or by both first and last name. It is important to recall that, in order to avoid a bias in this category due to Hillary Clinton’s use of her first name in official campaign materials, our coding scheme specifically excluded any name mentions that were made to look like realistic campaign advertising (e.g., bumper stickers, posters, or
buttons that were drawn in a realistic fashion). Thus, the figures for this category can be assumed to be fairly conservative.

**Race/gender central.** Not surprisingly, race was more often a central theme in cartoons featuring Obama than those featuring the other two candidates ($\chi^2(1) = 10.18, p = .001$). Similarly, gender was more often a central theme for cartoons of Clinton than for cartoons of the other two candidates ($\chi^2(1) = 9.55, p = .002$).

**Racist/sexist candidates.** Both Obama and Clinton were occasionally portrayed as being racist or sexist, or as being willing to exploit the racism or sexism of voters. In five cartoons, Obama was explicitly portrayed as being prejudiced against White people or as being aligned with someone else (Reverend Wright) who was explicitly described in this way. In one cartoon, a reporter asks him about his grandmother: “So you’re saying that your grandmother is prejudiced and makes broad assumptions about people based on race?” Obama’s response is a somewhat disgusted “Yeah. Typical white person.” In two other cartoons, this interview is referred to more obliquely (some of Obama’s dirty laundry is labeled
“typical white person-gate”; and a talking Obama doll says “typical white people”). Obama’s association with Reverend Wright is spelled out in text in one cartoon (“Rev. Wright’s racist rants”) and referred to more indirectly in another (Uncle Sam asks Obama “Do you have any character references that aren’t . . . loony racist preachers?”). Many additional cartoons linked Obama with Reverend Wright or portrayed Wright as a liability to the Obama campaign. However, unless there was some explicit reference to Wright’s anger specifically at White Americans, these were not coded under this category.

In three cartoons, Clinton was portrayed as “claiming” the White vote. For example, in Figure 3, as she and Obama sort laundry she informs him that “The whites are mine.” In another cartoon, she muses to herself that “White people like me”; in a third, she plants a flag labeled “Mine!” on the head of the White voter. Presumably, her confidence is related to a belief that some (racist) White voters will not vote for a Black candidate and so will be hers by default. A fourth cartoon referred to exploiting voters’ racism more obliquely; as a “goodie two shoes” child Hillary says “I would never raise gender or race as campaign issues, although it is obvious, isn’t it?” Interestingly, the most explicitly racist portrayals of Clinton were seen in two cartoons in which she is silent and Bill speaks for her, urging her in one cartoon to “Come out against what I call ‘the brown peril’” and in the
other telling Obama that he can be “deputy assistant Vice President” in Hillary’s administration, “which is more than a young black fella could normally expect” (Figure 2). In this last cartoon, Bill Clinton refers to Obama as “Bo,” which might simply be a play on Obama’s initials, but also has implicit racial overtones (to the African American tap dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and stereotypes of minstrelsy, as well as to the use of “boy” to refer to African American men).

One cartoon portrayed Obama as mildly sexist, in that he uses a sexualized insult against Clinton (calling her a “harridan”). In return, Clinton calls him a “dweeb.”

Stereotypes and role reversals. Clinton (22.9% of cartoons that featured her) was portrayed in a gender stereotypical way more frequently than was either Obama (1.9%; $\chi^2(1) = 32.11, p < .0001$) or McCain (5.6%; $\chi^2(1) = 7.99, p = .005$). Male stereotypes applied to Obama or McCain included smooth-talking ladies man, protector of one’s wife, and alpha male or Rambo (Figure 4). The female stereotypes that were applied to Clinton were more diverse, as well as more frequently applied. They included the domestic (cooking, serving food, doing
laundry as in Figure 3, being told by Bill to bake cookies or do laundry, holding a baby when no other candidate is), a concern with appearance or fashion (overly concerned about which outfit to wear, getting a manicure), overly emotional (crying, weeping, getting hysterical), needing a man to support her financially, indecisive or ditzy, queen/diva, and bitchy, witchy, or shrewish (often directed against her husband). She was portrayed both as the woman who won’t shut up (a frequent theme) and, paradoxically, as a passive, silent woman whose husband does the talking (and, sometimes, her dirty work). The cartoon in Figure 2 is an example of this latter stereotype. Not only is Hillary Clinton silent, she is drawn to resemble a puppet, implying that she is controlled by her husband.

Gender reversals were rare (3.8%) for Obama, nonexistent for McCain, and relatively frequent (17.0%) for Clinton. The comparison between Clinton and Obama was statistically reliable ($\chi^2(1) = 14.80, p < .001$), as was the comparison between Clinton and McCain ($\chi^2(1) = 10.49, p = .001$). For Obama, gender reversals included being dressed as a girl or woman, being overruled by his wife, being effete, and doing “women’s work” (e.g., laundry, as in Figure 3). Clinton was occasionally portrayed generically in men’s clothes, but the majority of the gender reversals had to do with the acquisition or wielding of power. If she was portrayed as a man, it was as a particularly powerful or masculine man, such as Indiana

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**Fig. 4.** Gary Varvel, originally published January 25, 2008.
Jones, Daniel Boone, race car driver, boxer, wrestler, paratrooper, soldier, knight, or quarterback. In some cartoons, Clinton was portrayed as “one of the boys,” shooting guns, and drinking “a shot and a beer” (in one cartoon she shows the sissified Obama how this is done). For example, in Figure 5 a child Hillary enjoys target practice with a shotgun and actually reverses roles with her father—she is the one to shoot at the encroaching “elitist” trespassers, thus protecting the family home. After successfully driving off the intruders, she celebrates with whiskey and a beer chaser (there are class implications in this cartoon, as well, something that we did not include in our coding scheme). A third common category of gender reversals for Clinton concerned power reversals in her relationship with her husband (e.g., he is literally on a leash held by her) or other men (she will lead if she dances with Obama, she would “take over” if she were vice president).

Explicit racial stereotypes were less common, but were present in 5.7% of the cartoons featuring Obama. These included portrayals of Obama as an athlete (basketball player, boxer), poor, lazy, and as a caricature of an “angry black man.” One of the strongest portrayals of racial stereotypes is shown in Figure 6. Here, Obama is represented as a responsible man, but the other African American man in the cartoon is portrayed with offensive racial stereotypes. He is drawn with
oversized lips and enormous feet (shod in athletic footwear). He is palming a basketball (athletic), yet lying on a sofa (lazy). He uses slang and seems angry. The tiny figure in the bottom left corner (who serves as a kind of Greek chorus) insinuates that the young man is apathetic and (perhaps) unpatriotic for not voting. This is an especially interesting example because the cartoon has a positive valence toward Obama, but a strongly negative valence toward Black men more generally. Even though Obama himself is singled out as an exception, racial stereotypes are still primed for the reader.

Three cartoons of Obama featured a reversal of racial stereotypes: Obama having much more money than the other candidates, Obama as an angel, and as very intelligent. These are considered to be counterstereotypical because of the stereotypes of African-Americans as poor, lazy, frequently engaging in criminal behavior, and stupid or uneducated.

Violence

Candidates as perpetrators. Of the three candidates, Clinton was the most frequently portrayed as committing violence compared with Obama and McCain; \( \chi^2(1) = 7.01, p = .008 \). There were also interesting qualitative differences in how the candidates were depicted as perpetrators and the extent and type of their violence.
When Obama and Clinton were shown as coperpetrating violence against each other (four cartoons), the style was a fairly traditional rendition of two political opponents fighting (two children fight in a school yard, candidates slinging mud, candidates in boxing ring knock out the Democratic donkey referee). One representation, however, was more graphic. In this cartoon (Figure 1), Clinton is depicted as the horror film character Jason. She appears to have been killed by Obama, but the audience knows that she is not dead and will strike back. Thus, this is a fight to the death for both candidates and the outcome will be bloody and gruesome (implied by drawing a machete as the weapon).

In addition to the cartoons just described, Obama was shown perpetrating violence in nine additional cartoons. Of these, four were against noncandidate figures: one against the reader, who is told by a threatening Obama to “Lay off my wife,” and three as verbal threats against babies or fetuses. The other five cartoons portrayed Obama committing unidirectional violence against Clinton: punching her in a boxing ring; she’s a pool ball and he’s about to strike her with the cue ball; they’re both knights and he’s cut off all her limbs (Figure 7); she’s the Wicked Witch of the West and he’s melted her with water; she’s a tree that he has almost chopped down.

Fig. 7. Glenn McCoy, originally published May 8, 2008.
In addition to the four coperpetration cartoons, Clinton was shown perpetrating violence in 19 additional cartoons, 15 against Obama and four against other people (Queen Hillary says “behead Bill Richardson”; the two Clintons drag an almost-dead donkey by the neck; Hillary gives Bill a black eye; a child Hillary shoots at elitists [Figure 5]). When Clinton is shown perpetrating violence against Obama, nonphysical behavior ranged from verbal harassment (but with a billy club in her hand) to more serious verbalizations (“let’s kill ’em”). She is also shown perpetrating physical violence against Obama, including kicking him in the ankle (while pretending to be a little angel); throwing dynamite at him; as an undead corpse dragging him into a grave; feeding him tomatoes with salmonella while saying “no hard feelings”; attacking his pedestal with a chainsaw; tormenting a doll-like Obama by pulling on his ears; as a dog, ripping off his leg and holding it in her mouth; biting his leg; and kneeling him in the crotch in the wrestling ring. In four cartoons, Bill Clinton is an accomplice to the violence, usually painted as “the enforcer” (e.g., Hillary tells Bill to “break out the sticks and stones”; Bill is a vicious dog, held on a leash by Hillary, threatening Obama).

Candidates as victims. Violence against candidates was shown in several cartoons. Although differences between candidates in violence victimization did not reach standard levels of statistical significance, there was a marginally significant difference between McCain’s violence victimization as compared to that of Obama and Clinton, $\chi^2(1) = 3.22, p = .073$. In addition to the candidate-perpetrated violence described above (all between Obama and Clinton), additional violence was perpetrated by third-party characters. McCain was shown as a victim in two cartoons (he’s a cow and has been branded by G.W. Bush; right-wing hit squads shoot at him with naval guns). Obama was shown as a victim of third-party violence in five cartoons (sharks and sea creatures gnaw at him under water, while above the water he’s smiling with a thumbs up; two little dogs gnaw at his ankles; Republican elephant threatens him with naval guns; he’s in a car with Reverend Wright as Wright drives off a cliff; crocodiles in a swamp threaten him). Clinton was shown as a victim of third-party violence in ten cartoons. In some, the violence was relatively mild (e.g., a cigar blows up in her face; she is an “ugly growth” on the back of the Democratic donkey that is going to be surgically removed). Others, however, are more extreme, including showing her running from a giant boulder that is about to roll over her (as in Indiana Jones movies), being stabbed through the heart with a stake, sawed in half by a magician, stabbed in the back with a knife (Figure 8), and crushed with a drawbridge. In others, different third-party characters urge Obama to chop off her leg with an axe or feed her Wicked Witch of the West hat into a wood chipper.
Discussion

Our analysis reveals the continuation of several gender-related themes shown in previous work, including gender reversals and overt and subtle sexism (Templin, 1999) and symbolic annihilation (Gilmartin & Brunn, 1998). Below, we discuss our major findings in terms of the valence of the cartoons, themes of gender and race, and issues related to violence.

Valence

Given that the role of editorial cartoons is mainly critique, it is not surprising that so many cartoons had an overall negative valence. However, it is striking that Clinton was shown negatively much more often than the male candidates, because one would expect that the generally negative tone of editorial cartoons would apply equally to all candidates. Instead, the cartoons placed a significantly heavier burden of negativity on Clinton and also showed her in several other domains as less appealing. For example, Clinton (and McCain) were shown as distinctly ugly more frequently than was Obama. Clinton was also the only candidate drawn as a monster, including references to her being a serial killer, various witches, and
a variety of “undead” figures. The combined findings regarding valence of the cartoons clearly show continued and unambiguous discomfort with Clinton as a major player on the national political stage, a discomfort noted by Templin (1999) a decade ago. Although the particular issues of the day have changed somewhat, Hillary Clinton is still perceived by the sampled cartoonists as a threatening figure, resulting in much more negative evaluations of her, both generally and specifically, compared to the male candidates.

Gender and Race

Our findings concerning the way that candidates are named and the closeness of their association with their spouse are consistent with those of Bystrom et al. (2001), who found that coverage of women candidates was more likely to include explicit reference to their marital status and children. The more frequent use of Clinton’s first name and diminutives like “Hil” are likely to make her seem less professional and less “grown up,” which therefore puts her on an unequal footing with her male opponents, who are consistently referred to by their full names or last names. Furthermore, she was significantly more likely to be shown in cartoons with her spouse than were the other two candidates. These are subtle forms of sexism that likely reflect continued discomfort with the level of power and achievement, both actual and symbolic, that are represented by Clinton’s candidacy. These results are consistent with Templin’s (1999) analysis of coverage of Clinton as First Lady and consistent with the results of valence discussed above. Interestingly, a similar pattern of address was not seen for Obama, even though there is a history of this type of subtle disrespect being directed against racial minority men, as well as White women and women of color.

However, the issues of name usage and salience of spouse are complicated by several factors. First, Clinton made an explicit choice to use her first name in campaign materials (e.g., the slogan “Hillary, ’08”). Although our coding scheme specifically excluded labels that appeared to be representations of campaign buttons or posters, it is possible that cartoonists used Clinton’s first name to label her because (in contrast to the other candidates) that was how she labeled herself. Another important factor is the specific history of the Clintons as a Washington power couple and their status as former First Lady and former president. Bill Clinton had political standing and experience, as well as a role within his political party that was simply not comparable to that of the other candidates’ spouses. As the most recent Democratic president, his role in the campaign was not just that of an ordinary spouse. Bill Clinton’s increased presence in cartoons may represent his more visible and powerful role within the campaign, rather than sexism. It is impossible in this study to entirely disentangle the effects of gender from the real-life aspects of campaign materials and the status of then-Senator Clinton’s spouse, so these factors remain as confounds in the current analysis. We look forward to
additional high-profile women and people of color seeking the presidency, which would allow a much larger and less unique sample that would aid us in drawing more definitive conclusions concerning gender, the use of first names, and mention of a spouse.

Similar to the results of Caliendo and McIlwain (2006), we found that race was more likely to be a central theme in cartoons about Obama, and gender was more likely to be a central theme in cartoons about Clinton. Overall, however, racial stereotypes seemed to be less salient than were gender stereotypes (although, interestingly, both Obama and Clinton were portrayed as racist in a handful of cartoons). Given that there was both a man of color and a White woman in contention for the nomination, we were somewhat surprised that gender stereotypes were more frequent than racial stereotypes. Perhaps it has become more unacceptable for explicitly racist stereotypes to be presented in editorial cartoons. This would be an important, and a welcome, development. If so, however, the reticence of cartoonists (and editors) to perpetuate stereotypes does not appear to extend to gender stereotypes. Another possibility is that in the case of a campaign for president, gender “trumps” race as the norm violation with which cartoonists (and, perhaps, the public at large) are most concerned.

Violence

Clinton was more frequently portrayed as perpetrating violence than were the two male candidates. This is a striking and unexpected finding both because men (as a group) are much more likely to perpetrate violence than are women (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010) and because one of the other two candidates (McCain) has a reputation for being easily angered, something that has been discussed and satirized in the media (Leahy, 2008). Clinton has no such reputation, so by virtue of both her personality and her gender, we might expect her to be portrayed as perpetrating violence less often than the male candidates (especially McCain). This was not the case.

Moreover, cartoons featuring Clinton and involving violence were exceptional in other ways. Clinton was shown being violent against a wider variety of people and doing more vicious things than the other candidates (with the one exception of Obama cutting off all her limbs in one cartoon [Figure 7]). She was also the only candidate shown as an animal while perpetrating violence, and the only candidate portrayed as committing serious violence as a child. These differences in characterization serve to “other” Clinton, reinforcing her continued outsider status, and undermining her viability as a candidate.

Furthermore, even though Clinton was shown perpetrating violence more often than either McCain or Obama, she was also a victim of violence in over 10% of the cartoons that featured her (as was Obama). More worrisome (and
unlike the pattern for Obama), the portrayal of violence against her seemed to be especially lethal, and sometimes graphic and disturbing, leaving no doubt that great bodily harm and even death were imminent. In some cases, the severity of the violence was used to illustrate her indestructible qualities, such as indicating she wasn’t out of the race even after Obama had cut off her arms and legs, or she had been crushed by a house. However, the cartoonists were far from complimentary about her ability to come back from seeming defeat with this use of violence. Furthermore, even if the message is supposed to be positive (she keeps coming back), there is cause for concern about the signals such graphic use of violence sends to women considering entering politics as a career. This literal annihilation goes well beyond the “symbolic annihilation” of women found by Gilmartin and Brunn (1998).

We speculate that the association of Clinton with violence, as both perpetrator and victim, could have a chilling effect in several areas. First, women considering politics as a possible career could be pressured away from such involvement by the clear indication that to be a woman in politics involves either being violent oneself, and/or being the victim of violence, a conclusion unlikely to appeal to many young women. Second, the representation of Clinton as the victim of violence adds to the culture of violence against women in which misogynistic violence is glorified and used as entertainment in films, television programs, music videos, and video games. It is troubling to see violent representations directed, even in satire, against a real woman, especially as she attempts to be elected to a powerful position. Of course, actual violence against women is an all-too common reality (Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Leukefeld, 2006). It is beyond the scope of this article to address the question of whether exposure to violent cartoons is causally related to the perpetration of actual violence, but it is troubling that so many cartoons reflected this culture of violence.

We also wonder whether violence was a specific response to the strong role that Clinton was playing in the primaries. Given that women are often at greatest risk of lethal domestic violence after they have left their batterer and are thus exercising power (Campbell et al., 2003), it is possible that the high levels of violence directed at Clinton in the editorial cartoons was related to the fact that she was exercising power in an explicit (and history-making) way—by waging a competitive campaign for her party’s nomination for president of the United States. Further research on editorial cartoons might compare the presence of violence against Clinton with violence against other (less powerful) women during the same time period, or might compare violence against Clinton the presidential candidate versus violence against Clinton the First Lady. Although Clinton was an especially strong and powerful First Lady (and thus aroused discomfort in many people), the First Lady role is clearly more gender stereotypical, and less powerful, than that of presidential candidate.
Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our analysis of the cartoons covering the time period of the 2008 primary election revealed a number of important themes, many of which are consistent with prior research. However, it is not without limitations. One of these is the difficulty of ascertaining the generalizability of our coding of the use of Clinton’s first name/nickname compared to last/first and last names for the male candidates, as discussed above. A related, second issue is the confounding of Clinton’s spouse with a much higher level of status (as former president) than any of the spouses of other candidates. It could be fruitful to contrast the portrayal of vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin in cartoons regarding the use of her first or last names with other candidates from the general election cycle as a way to address some of these issues, because she was a high-profile candidate who had a low-profile spouse and who did not make her first name a central part of her campaign material. We might predict, based on the present results, that cartoonists would use her first name more often and would reference her spouse more often, than they would for the male candidates. It might also be useful to explore the use of nicknames (e.g., Barry vs. Hil) or the use of culturally unusual names such as Barack compared to John or Sarah.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to look more generally at the themes present in editorial cartoons during the general election, because issues of race and gender continued to be salient in that time period, with the candidacies of Obama and Palin. This might give insight into whether race would still be a less salient issue compared to gender, as was the pattern we found in coverage of the primary season.

We chose coding categories based on previous research on political commentary and gender and racial stereotypes. Also, the choice of coding categories was informed by our initial examination of the sample of cartoons. We believe we have captured much of the information related to race and gender contained in these cartoons. However, other coding categories could profitably be explored. For example, it might be possible to code in a more detailed way for valence. Candidates can be criticized (or praised) for a variety of things, including their ethics and character, their associates, their personalities, their level of experience, and their stance on various issues. Some studies (e.g., Kahn, 1993) have shown that women candidates receive less issues coverage in news articles, and it may be that this discrepancy is also present in editorial cartoons. Social class is another category in which stereotypes are rampant. An analysis of classist stereotypes in editorial cartoons of political candidates would be an important contribution.

In our study, we did not assess whether political ideology (of either the cartoonist or the candidate being portrayed) was predictive of particular types of gender or race stereotypes. Future work pursuing this question would be
interesting. To be most persuasive, such work would need a large sample of both candidates and cartoonists.

Practice and Policy

Editorial cartoons offer a unique window onto the ways in which messages about political candidates are created and communicated. As such, they are important avenues of cultural communication that may simultaneously reflect, reinforce, and create influential narratives about the characters they satirize. Unfortunately, in the case of political candidates, these messages are not randomly assigned. Our research shows that racist and, especially, sexist themes continue to appear in editorial cartoons. Although more research on the effects of these cartoons would be welcome, previous studies (Baumgartner, 2008; Brinkman, 1968; Morris, 2009; Young, 2004) suggest that editorial cartoons, as well as other forms of political satire, can affect people’s attitudes about candidates. Thus, the presence of negative stereotypes in editorial cartoons may negatively impact a candidate’s chances for election.

Even in the absence of a direct effect on attitudes, publishing cartoons with racist or sexist themes sends the message that such beliefs are acceptable. For these reasons, we urge cartoonists to exercise more care in their use of race and gender stereotypes in editorial cartoons, and we recommend that editors consider the possible effects of racist or sexist cartoons before publishing them. We applaud the efforts of commentators such as Melissa McEwan (blogging at http://shakespearessister.blogspot.com/), who tirelessly collect and disseminate examples of racism and sexism in political discourse and commentary, and we look forward to the day when such examples will be increasingly difficult to find.

References


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