

Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, September 2007, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc in Politics and Communication. Supervised

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1. Introduction

The cost of women politicians' handbags became the subject of one of the more memorable debates in the media coverage of the Labour Party Deputy Leadership election in 2007. The debate started when Harriet Harman expressed concern about Britain becoming a 'divided society' "where many people struggle to make ends meet while others spend £10 000 on a handbag" (Brown, The Independent, 2nd June 2007). Hazel Blears, commented on this by saying that she did not think it

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2. Theory, p

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in terms of quality women politicians are however restricted by gendered coverage in terms of image traits and marital status and family.

Since Bystrom et al. (2004) and most other researchers, study election campaigns in the USA, one could argue that the political landscape is different from the UK. For example the division of male and female issues is not exactly the same, and the family of a candidate play a less important role in campaigning in the UK. On the other hand Ross's research (1995, 2002) shows similar findings in a UK environment. While it is interesting to speculate whether Bystrom et al.'s conclusions hold true for a UK environment, it is not vital since it is their framework, rather than their conclusions, that have been adapted for this study.

There are obviously some categories in the webstyle and ~~the~~

The differences that will be expl

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Strategy and Rationale for Methodology

The choice of studying texts has a theoretical justification. The gender system is constantly shaped through cultural representation. Simultaneously cultural products, such as newspaper articles and website texts, can be used to understand the gender system. Rose Weitz is one of the feminist researchers who extols the value of studying cultural products. According to Weitz "the cultural products of any given society at any given time reverb

A search in LexisNexis for all occurrences of Harriet Harman and Deputy Leader gives 245 hits. The same search for Hazel Blears gives 247 hits. Since this population would be too large for the scope of this dissertation the sample was narrowed down further. With a random sample there would be a risk that many of the articles would be brief mentions of the candidates' names and not actually focus on the candidate. Therefore the LexisNexis search function "major mention" was used to select articles where the candidate is mentioned in the headline, lead paragraph or indexing. Some articles that mention both Harman and Blears occur in both samples. This is not a problem since we are comparing the media coverage and website presentation for each candidate individually, and not each candidate head-to-head. For example a newspaper article that mentions both the candidates will be analysed for each of them separately and shall count for a candidate.

more detailed discussion about how character traits are described all words that are used to describe character traits will be presented in a table for each group of texts.

During the research process one variable was added to measure how often the r

5. Results and interpretation⁷

5.1 Blears's website

Most of the texts on Hazel Blears website (52.5 percent) focus mainly on the campaign itself; reporting from hustings and campaign activities or stating endorsements. 15 per cent of the texts have a clear policy focus; these are mainly the texts in the debate section and two from the news section. Notably the blog entries almost always focus on campaign coverage. Some of the texts focus on the collapse of the office building where Blears's headquarters was situated; these are coded as other/not possible to say. Blears's focus in the website texts are also relatively often on the Labour Party (writing about how to win next election oo

at previous research on what character traits are normally associated with women according to Khan (1996), such as emotional, understanding, warm, compassionate, there is no indication that these kinds of traits are the ones Blears's own website uses to describe her; energy and drive is more likely to be associated with men if looking at Khan's research (1996).

Table 2 Character Traits on Blears's Website

Committed
Keen to speak to local activists
Decisive
Inspires
Drive
Energy
Passionate
Courageous
Enthusiasm
Hard working
In touch with members
Feet firmly on the ground
Tough
Wants to answer questions
Positive
Engaging
Upbeat

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When looking at other ways Blears is presented as a person on her website, she herself does not state her sex explicitly anywhere on her website. It is only mentioned in the endorsements that it would be preferable to have a woman as Deputy Leader. In —————

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The fact that Harman is a woman is mentioned explicitly more often than it is for Blears. This could possibly be explained by the

this way women, as well

But even if the candidates' personal presentation in media sometimes can be traced from t

the handbag debate, but other articles (deliberately or not) also focus on only on the two women candidates, for example in an article in the Guardian from 22nd June with the headline "First Ladies". (Taylor, The Guardian, 22nd June 2007)

6. Conclusion

This dissertation argues that the numerical under-representation of women in politics is interconnected with the media representation and self

having a relentless focus on policy issues, but framed in a way that suits the media coverage. The potential for self-presentation should not be over-estimated in the short term as even this is conditioned by the gender system that the general public, the media, and the candidates themselves are accustomed.

It is a point of fact that women candidates will be treated differently in media. Hence continued research into the relations between self-presentation and media representation is necessary. This dissertation shows how research of candidate websites can be an important tool to do this, but an expansion of the methodological framework including interviews with politicians, advisers, and journalists, and more qualitati

Appendix 1 Sampling procedures

Newspaper articles

LexisNexis search for Harriet Harman, major mention and deputy leader or deputy leadership between 14th May and 22nd June gives 55 results (taking away when the same articles occur twice)

LexisNexis search for Hazel Blears major mention and deputy leader or deputy leadership between 14th May and 22nd June gives 63 results (taking away when the same articles occur twice)

Website texts

Websites were saved with a special software on the 27th June.

57 Hazel Blears News We are as bored as you with stories
about

114	Hazel Blears	News	Brown heading for coronation	The Daily Telegraph	16/5/07
115	Hazel Blears	News	Politics: Deputy Leadership: How the Support lines up	The Guardian	16/5/07
116	Hazel Blears	News	It turned out Granny Meacher was the one biting th		

155 Hazel Blears Website Thank you to all my support

5. Sex

Does the text explicitly mention the candidates sex by saying woman where it could have been avoided? Also when it is mentioned that a woman is needed as a Deputy Leader it is coded as explicitly mentioning the sex.

6. Marital status

Looks at whether the text tells us about the candidate's marital status

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