

## Political Television and Perceptions of American Politics

### **Sounding Presidential**

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Between speculations of a 2016 Hillary Clinton presidential run, a gubernatorial campaign energized by Wendy Davis' sneakered filibuster, and memes touting Elizabeth Warren's economic wisdom, women's political visibility has expanded in recent years. Though this is cause for some optimism in the fight for equal political gender representation, the odds are still stacked against women in government. Women make up only about 20% of elected representatives and mayors nationally, and a woman has never held the office of president or vice president.

Female politicians in fictional media are only slightly more successful than their historical counterparts, as *Veep* and (briefly) *Scandal* recently advanced the second and third fictional female American presidents. Unfortunately, like Geena Davis' *Commander in Chief* before them, these women were not elected. Still, it's hard to blame *Scandal's* VP for stepping up when the president is comatose, and *Veep's* Julia Louis-Dreyfus is generally charming, despite her fumbles. While narratives like these offer important dimensions of the media's portrayal of women in politics, a thorough examination of the nation's highest office on television should include careful and thorough listening.

Even before the 24-hour news cycle began circulating presidential sound bites, the presidency was characterized by a symbolic eloquence often projected onto the voice. For example, though first-hand accounts described Lincoln's voice as unpleasantly nasal, he has consistently been portrayed in media as speaking with a rich, soothing timbre. Furthermore, the importance of presidential addresses means that citizens quickly recognize our presidents' spoken voices. President Obama's voice became familiar, I would argue, not only because of its noticeable quirks, but also because, through television and radio broadcasts of campaign speeches and debates, the sounds of our presidents and presidential candidates are ubiquitous.

The problem with the particular timbre of real and imagined presidential speech isn't so much that it's ubiquitous; the problem is that it's masculine. Generations of real and fictional male presidents and vice presidents have advanced a particular pattern of pitch, rate, and timbre, sounding authoritative, calm, and eloquent, with measured patterns of speech that signal great care and forethought. This type of speech is not linked to biological sex, but the association of a "presidential sound" with masculinity is deeply entrenched in both the cultural psyche and media conventions, creating a gendered double bind: women who speak presidentially are labeled masculine, while women who speak in a more typically feminine way are not heard as presidential.

Political television's role in this process is two-fold: not only do fictional presidents on shows like *Scandal* and *House of Cards* perpetuate a limited scope of presidential speech, shows like *Veep* and *Saturday Night Live* also use feminized speech to create

comedy from incongruity. As a result of her character's frequent frustration, Louis-Dreyfus' performance in *Veep*, for example, is peppered with wide vocal pitch fluctuations associated with femininity. Though *House of Cards*' Kevin Spacey also shows moments of emotional overflow, Spacey is the measured, calm, cool, and calculating foil to Louis-Dreyfus' exasperation. These portrayals are underscored and solidified by their vocal tone, only one of which aligns with historically normative presidential speech.

Non-fictional presidential and vice presidential candidates are not immune. When feminists Tina Fey and Amy Poehler stood side-by-side as Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton, Poehler protested against gendered depictions of Clinton, adamantly opposing a bit involving Clinton's "water works" on the campaign trail. But Fey parroted Palin's voice, adding humor, in part, by stretching the range and speed of the candidate's pitch variation. Rapid pitch fluctuation, which has repeatedly been associated with overly feminized speech patterns, added a covertly gendered component to *SNL*'s case against her competency. Driving the point home, Poehler's deadpan delivery foregrounded Clinton's narrower (and lower) pitch range, emphasizing the problematic dilemma faced by women in politics: too much pitch fluctuation communicates emotional instability (a trait that doesn't fare well for politicians), while too little pitch fluctuation communicates masculinity (a trait necessary for male politicians, but detrimental to women in the field).

By shaping the sonic symbolism of the presidency, media has contributed to the problem of limited women's political representation through consistent patterns of repetition (of normative, masculine voices) and discipline (of exaggeratedly feminine vocal delivery). As with most issues of cultural representation, though, media can also contribute to a solution. Before Davis' performance in *Commander in Chief*, for example, we had never heard a woman deliver the State of the Union address. This fictional portrayal contributed to a broader scope of voices in the role of president. Taking women politicians seriously – neither mocking their femininity nor exaggeratedly masculinizing them as, in Clinton's case, "ball busters" – is a crucial step. At the same time, it is imperative that media scholars pay attention to the ways gender in political television has the potential to influence the historical political sphere. To do that completely, we need to listen.