Powerful in Pearls and Willie Brown’s Mistress:

A computational analysis of gendered news coverage of Kamala Harris

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Overview and goals

Long history of sexist, racist coverage of women candidates and candidates of color.

Modern hyper-polarized media ecosystem.
Historical patterns of bias

Women candidates receive less coverage than their male counterparts (Falk, 2010; Aday & Devitt, 2001).

Coverage of women candidates tends to focus on their physical appearance, family lives and personality traits as opposed to their campaigns or policy issues (Devitt, 2002; Kahn, 1994; Meeks, 2013).

Women candidates are often sexualized. In other cases, they are vilified for embracing traditionally masculine leadership qualities (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009).

When women of color seek elected office, the coverage they receive is especially problematic (Gershon, 2012; Ward, 2017), reflecting Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of intersectionality.

News coverage of Black women tends to perpetuate damaging stereotypes including those that portray them as hypersexual or emasculating (Meyers, 2013).
Tools and time period

Biden announces Harris as his running mate

Aug 19, 2020

100th day of the Biden/Harris administration

Apr 30, 2021

mediacloud.org
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Partisan Media Collections

- Media sourced from a Twitter panel linked to voter registration records
- Bias score computed based on the ratio of sharing volume
- 5 partisan collections of online news sources created
Story Ingest & Analysis
There were stark differences in the *volume* and *type* of coverage Harris received.
Volume of coverage by quintile
Topics by quintile
History repeats, especially on the far right.

Example #1: Willie Brown and hypersexualization

Kamala Harris, the woman who could be president thanks to Willie

By M. Dowling - March 4, 2021

As Joe Biden falters due to his mentally deteriorating state, it looks like the woman who got 0% in her own presidential campaign, could become president. She would be the first woman, the first woman of color, the first descended from slave owners, the first who slept her way to the top.
History repeats, especially on the far right.

Example #1: Willie Brown and hypersexualization
History repeats, especially on the far right

Example #2: “Harris–Biden” administration and unfeminine ambition

Since day one, our team has speculated that Biden’s campaign is a ruse. The real goal is to get Kamala Harris elected as the first black, or sort of black, female president of the United States.
History repeats, especially on the far right

Example #3: Cackling and vilification
Meanwhile, on the left...
Coverage of Harris is especially intense on the partisan extremes.

Mostly Republican-shared sources focus on narratives not covered in other quintiles.

Emerging gendered narrative about fashion as a political statement of empowerment, identify, and affiliation (ie. not just the male gaze).