

**THE PRESS AND LAURA BOYD:
PRESS COVERAGE IN THE 1998 OKLAHOMA
GUBERNATORIAL CAMPAIGN**

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This paper examines the press coverage of the 1998 Oklahoma gubernatorial campaign. The present research seeks to understand if the press was biased against the Democratic nominee Laura Boyd and whether or not the bias was based on Boyd's gender. The data indicate that Boyd received less coverage than the incumbent Governor Frank Keating. Boyd was unable to raise enough money to spend on paid media while also being unable to attract the free coverage from the newspapers.

In 1998, Oklahoma voters were presented with their first opportunity to elect a woman governor. Laura Boyd, a member of the Oklahoma House of Representatives from Norman, was nominated by the Democratic Party to try to unseat a popular and well-financed incumbent, Republican Frank Keating. How did Boyd's campaign play in the state's newspapers?

This paper examines and analyzes press coverage of the 1998 gubernatorial campaign, focusing specifically on the two major party candidates. Among the research issues involved in this study is an examination of how the press covers statewide campaigns. Was the press biased toward or against Boyd? Did she receive much press coverage at all? Did it matter that she was a woman or that she was challenging an incumbent?

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN STATEWIDE ELECTIONS

The candidacy of a woman for political office is no longer the novelty it once was, especially in Oklahoma (see Atkins 2001). In fact, Mary Fallin, the Republican candidate for Lieutenant Governor, was reelected in 1998. The problems facing female candidates for office are also well-documented (see Kahn 1996). While the body of research is growing, a gap exists in our understanding of the press coverage of female candidates (Carroll 1985; Kahn 1996; Mandel 1981). The gap in knowledge is particularly wide in state and local races, campaigns that are most likely to involve female candidates. In 1998, the Oklahoma press corps faced a new experience, covering a female gubernatorial candidate.

Subnational elections, with or without female candidates, are relatively obscure events. There is significant literature on the role of the media in presidential campaigns (e.g., Joslyn 1984; Patterson 1980) and less attention to the media's role in congressional campaigns (e.g., Clarke and Evans 1983; Kahn 1993). However, there is almost no literature on the role of the media in statewide campaigns (Fico, Clogston, and Pizante 1988; Rozell 1991; Rozell and Wilson 1996; Rausch, Rozell, and Wilson 1999).

The news media are affected by the gender of candidates for statewide office. Kim Fridkin Kahn argues that while female candidates in general receive about equal news coverage as male candidates, they receive much less issue coverage than men. In gubernatorial campaigns, reporters tend to stress personalities over issues. The lack of issue coverage occurs despite the fact that women's issues, such as education and health, are emphasized in gubernatorial campaigns (Kahn 1993; Kahn 1996; Sapiro 1982).

OKLAHOMA'S GUBERNATORIAL CAMPAIGN

The 1998 Oklahoma gubernatorial campaign featured an under-financed Democrat with little statewide name recognition challenging a relatively popular Republican incumbent with national aspirations. The Democrat, Laura Boyd, gave up her seat in the Oklahoma House of Representatives to run for governor. The Republican, Governor Frank

Keating, reportedly gained popularity for his handling of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, an event that occurred shortly after he took office. Jean Shumway Warner (2001, 21) records that "the Keating years have seen the largest broad-based tax cuts in the state's history, education spending at an all time high, and a massive road construction program." Despite her underdog status, Boyd campaigned hard (see Jenkins 1998).

In what was the most expensive campaign in Oklahoma history, Governor Keating defeated Boyd by a 505,498 (58.6 percent) to 357,552 (41.4 percent) margin (Talley 2000). Keating's campaign raised more than \$2.6 million for the race while Boyd was able to collect about \$500,000 in contributions (English 1998). According to exit polls (reported in Kurt 1998), voters believed Keating was in touch with their concerns. The incumbent also received support from approximately one-third of the voters identifying themselves as Democrats (Kurt 1998). Observers of trends in Oklahoma politics (e.g., Gaddie and Buchanan 1998; Bednar and Hertzke 1995) have presented evidence that Oklahoma is experiencing a shift away from the Democratic Party.

This paper seeks to understand how the press coverage affected Laura Boyd's campaign. Since she was challenging an incumbent, an important focus of this paper is how much of the coverage focused on the horse-race aspect of the campaign rather than issues. Boyd indicated that an inability to raise funds had a negative effect on her campaign. Did the issue of Boyd's gender appear in the press coverage?

METHODOLOGY

This analysis is based on a survey of local print media articles about the campaign. A comprehensive content analysis was conducted of two newspapers for the period beginning September 1, 1998, and ending on election day, November 3, 1998. This period is appropriate for study because the primary election was held on August 25, 1998. The general election campaign in Oklahoma does not really start until Labor Day. The newspapers examined for this analysis were selected because they have the widest circulation in Oklahoma and they were available on Lexis-Nexis, a database of newspaper articles.

The two most widely circulated and influential newspapers in the state are the (Oklahoma City) *Daily Oklahoman* and the *Tulsa World*. The *Daily Oklahoman* is understood as having a "very conservative and Republican bias in its news coverage" (Farmer 1994, 39; Morgan, England, and Humphreys 1991; Rausch 1994). The *Daily Oklahoman* also enjoys nearly statewide circulation. The *Tulsa World* circulates primarily throughout the northeastern part of the state and is known as being less conservative and less Republican than the *Daily Oklahoman*. Being large circulation papers, both papers have a greater percentage of articles produced for their readers. Other newspapers in the state rely significantly on the *Associated Press* for coverage of statewide activities. Adding more papers to the sample would have increased coverage of local events involving the candidates, but the stories from the AP may have contaminated the sample.

The two papers provided some coverage of the 1998 gubernatorial campaign, although the coverage was not as extensive as that found in other states (see Rozell 1991; Rozell and Wilson 1996; Rausch, Rozell, and Wilson 1999). The data presented here were collected by a review of 64 news stories that appeared in the papers during the period studied. Since Keating was the incumbent governor, care was taken to include only articles that were about campaign activities. Stories were selected because they discussed the gubernatorial campaigns.

This content analysis follows the approach adopted by earlier studies of the press coverage of the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial campaign (Rozell 1991) and the 1993 Virginia gubernatorial campaign (Rozell and Wilson 1996).

ANALYSIS

News coverage was grouped into three general categories: 1) subject matter - articles are identified as issue, horse-race, character, profile, and others; 2) issue coverage - education, crime, health care, car taxes, among others; and 3) candidate coverage - the amount of coverage given each candidate and the type of coverage (positive, negative or neutral).

SUBJECT MATTER

Many studies find that the press focuses on the horse-race aspects of campaign, rather than covering policy issues. The press has been criticized for directing attention to candidates' character and campaign gimmicks instead of providing voters with the information they need to make a vote choice.

Research on both national and state press coverage has identified these problems. According to Doris Graber (1984, 200), the media emphasize "brief, rapidly paced, freshly breaking trivial events." Examining the press coverage of the 1986 North Carolina campaign for the U.S. Senate, Paul Luebke (1987) found that journalists ignored substantive policy issues "in the heat of reporting on events, trends, and characteristics." A content analysis of the 1978 Florida gubernatorial campaign discovered that reporters avoided "analytic or interpretive articles which require more time, effort, and space" (Fedler 1981).

A few studies find that the press is performing better in covering "real" issues. Mark Rozell (1991) reveals that 32.7 percent of the local coverage of the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial campaign focused on issues. Candidate and voter group profiles were examined in 12.8 percent of the stories. A similar study of the 1993 Virginia gubernatorial race found that 28.9 percent of the stories were about issues while 15.3 percent of the stories were about candidate and voter group profiles (Rozell and Wilson 1996).

The press coverage of the 1998 Oklahoma gubernatorial campaign focused primarily on issues and less on the horse-race aspects of the campaign. Table 1 shows that issue coverage comprised 39.1 percent of all stories in both newspapers.

Only about 17 percent of the stories described the horse-race aspects of the campaign. The character of the candidates was not a large portion of the news presented in the two papers. Only about 11 percent of the articles focused on character issues. Note that the examination of news stories did not include editorials.

The "other" category includes articles that do not fit into one of the four thematic categories. Such articles include those reporting candidate visits to communities, interest group endorsements, and the unveiling of new campaign commercials.

TABLE 1
State Press Coverage of
the 1998 Oklahoma Gubernatorial Election by Subject Matter

Subject Matter	<i>Daily Oklahoman</i>		<i>Tulsa World</i>		Totals	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Issue	17	37.0	8	44.4	25	39.1
Horse-race	8	17.4	3	16.7	11	17.2
Character	5	10.9	2	11.1	7	10.9
Profile	5	10.9	1	5.6	6	9.4
Other	11	23.9	4	22.2	15	23.4
Total	46	100.1	18	100.0	64	100.0

ISSUE COVERAGE

The local press covered a wide range of issues during the course of the campaign. These data are presented in Table 2. Education was clearly an important issue in the campaign with 32 percent of the stories. If the stories about State Questions 680 and 681 are included, the amount of education stories increases to 40 percent. Education is regularly identified as important to most state voters. Laura Boyd should have benefited from the focus on education, because as Kahn argues "the relevant issues in gubernatorial campaigns tend to correspond to women's stereotypical strength." These issues include child care, the environment, education, and health (Kahn 1996, 75).

Prisons also were an important issue in the 1998 campaign. Governor Keating publicized his "get tough on crime" position as well as his attempt to cut costs by privatizing corrections services.

Social issues were largely absent from the campaign as indicated by the paltry number of stories on abortion (4 percent). Taxes and government fees, especially the costs of car tags, were the subjects of only 16 percent of the articles. Interestingly, Laura Boyd seemed to get the most coverage of her plan to lower tag renewals by \$50 (Gillham 1998).

Laura Boyd's gender did not become an issue in the campaign as reflected in Table 2. She did not draw attention to her historic candidacy and the Republican Party did not address the issue either. The candidate for lieutenant governor also was a woman, thereby neutralizing the Republican Party on the issue. Of course, the positive stereotypes we hold about women also did not become a factor in the race (see Kahn 1996).

CANDIDATE COVERAGE

Reviewing her campaign, Boyd noted that the biggest factor in her loss was her inability to raise the large amount of money needed to defeat a popular incumbent (English 1998). Without significant fundraising, she would have to rely on the "free media" provided by the newspapers. Table 3 illustrates how much coverage the candidates received.

TABLE 2
State Press Coverage of
the 1998 Oklahoma Gubernatorial Election by Policy Issue

Policy Issue	<i>Daily Oklahoman</i>		<i>Tulsa World</i>		Totals	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Education	4	23.5	4	50.0	8	32.0
Car Tags	0	0.0	2	25.0	2	8.0
Water	0	0.0	1	12.5	1	4.0
SQ 680/681	2	11.8	0	0.0	2	8.0
Oil Prices	1	5.9	0	0.0	1	4.0
Prisons	4	23.5	0	0.0	4	16.0
Health Care	0	0.0	1	12.5	1	4.0
State Airplane	1	5.9	0	0.0	1	4.0
Taxes	2	11.8	0	0.0	2	8.0
Abortion	1	5.9	0	0.0	1	4.0

TABLE 3
State Press Coverage of
the 1998 Oklahoma Gubernatorial Election by Candidate

Candidate	<i>Daily Oklahoman</i>		<i>Tulsa World</i>		Totals	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Boyd	4	8.9	3	15.8	7	10.9
Keating	21	46.7	9	47.4	30	46.9
Both	20	44.4	7	36.8	27	42.2
Total	45	100.0	19	100.0	64	100.0

Laura Boyd did not receive a lot of coverage in the papers. Out of 64 articles providing candidate coverage, only 10.9 percent focused solely on Boyd. Both candidates were mentioned in 42.2 percent of the articles, while Governor Keating received coverage in 46.9 percent. Remember that this study only reviewed articles dealing with the campaign. It appears that in order to mount a more effective campaign, Boyd needed more money.

Was there any bias in the newspaper coverage? The 64 stories were analyzed for positive, negative, and neutral coverage of the candidates. The total number of positive, negative, and neutral stories exceeds 64 because one news story could count as positive or negative for both candidates, or even positive for one and negative for the other.

As Table 4 reveals, Boyd actually received more favorable coverage than Keating. In part this might be attributed to the fact that Keating was the incumbent. Of the articles mentioning Boyd, 44.1 percent were positive while only 26.5 percent were negative. The distribution for the *Daily Oklahoman* alone is similar, despite the fact that one would assume that the *Daily Oklahoman* would attack Boyd more. Only 20 percent of the articles appearing in the *Tulsa World* were negative toward Boyd. This is to be expected if the *Tulsa World* is a "Democratic" newspaper.

Much of the miniscule coverage of the "horse race" focused on Keating's ability to raise funds. Table 5 indicates that 50 percent of the horse-race stories were negative towards Boyd. More than half, 55.6 percent, of the horse-race stories on Keating were positive, although the number of such stories was small.

CONCLUSION

This research finds that the press coverage of the 1998 Oklahoma gubernatorial campaign was substantive, what there was of it. While there were some stories focusing on the horse-race and character issues of the campaign, a significant number of articles provided newspaper readers with a discussion of the issues.

While the overall quality of the press coverage is admirable, we should be concerned about the amount of coverage. One would expect

TABLE 4

**Candidate Favorability Ratings in State Press Coverage of
the 1998 Oklahoma Gubernatorial Election**

Candidate	<i>Daily Oklahoman</i>		<i>Tulsa World</i>		Totals	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Boyd						
Positive	11	45.8	4	40.0	15	44.1
Negative	7	29.2	2	20.0	9	26.5
Neutral	6	25.0	4	40.0	10	29.4
Total	24	100.0	10	100.0	34	100.0
Keating						
Positive	13	31.7	6	37.5	19	33.3
Negative	17	41.5	5	31.3	22	38.6
Neutral	11	26.8	5	31.3	16	28.1
Total	41	100.0	16	100.1	57	100.0

TABLE 5
 Favorability Ratings in Horse-Race Stories,
 1998 Oklahoma Gubernatorial Election

Candidate	Daily Oklahoman		Tulsa World		Totals	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Boyd						
Positive	3	42.9	1	33.3	4	40.0
Negative	3	42.9	2	66.7	5	50.0
Neutral	1	14.3	0	0.0	1	10.0
Total	7	100.1	3	100.0	10	100.0
Keating						
Positive	3	50.0	2	66.7	5	55.6
Negative	1	16.7	1	33.3	2	22.2
Neutral	2	33.3	0	0.0	2	22.2
Total	6	100.0	3	100.0	9	100.0

the statewide press to be more thorough in its coverage of a gubernatorial campaign even if the incumbent looks unbeatable. An exit poll conducted during the 1998 election by students at the University of Oklahoma found that 26 percent of the respondents use newspapers and magazines as their primary source of information about political candidates. Most respondents (34.2 percent) get their information from television news coverage. While it would have been useful to view the TV news coverage of the campaign for this study, the tapes are difficult to obtain. A review of the TV news coverage probably would produce findings similar to those from the newspapers.

The lack of astounding findings also suggests a problem in the application of this methodology. The present research replicates studies involving two gubernatorial challengers seeking an open seat (Rausch, Rozell, and Wilson 1999; Rozell and Wilson 1996; Rozell 1991). In those races, the newspapers worked to introduce the candidates and their ideas to the states' electorates.

Considering the limits of the present research, the dataset and analysis will become more useful if Boyd seeks another statewide office. If she is successful in that future campaign, the data presented here could be compared with data from the future newspaper coverage. The comparison would help draw a finer distinction in theory about female candidates for state-level offices.

The newspaper record does not indicate that gender played a significant role in the 1998 gubernatorial campaign. Had she not run against a popular incumbent, Laura Boyd may have seen a more positive outcome as a result of her campaign. Boyd also did not run a campaign emphasizing the symbolic importance of becoming the first female governor of Oklahoma. Thus, she was unable to capitalize on the positive stereotypes of women in gubernatorial campaigns. While additional data on this campaign and other campaigns involving female gubernatorial candidates are needed, this research provides little support to the theory that female candidates for statewide office fare worse than their male opponents, just because of gender.

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