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Gender matters in questioning presidents

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This paper traces the increasing prominence of women in the White House press corps over the latter half of the 20th century, and considers how this trend toward greater gender balance has impacted the questioning of presidents. Modest gender differences are documented in the topical content of questions, with women journalists slightly favoring domestic policy and private-sphere topics relative to men. More substantial differences are documented in aggressiveness, with women journalists asking more adversarial questions, and more assertive questions at least in the earlier years of the sampling period. The topical content differences are broadly aligned with traditional conceptions of gender, but the stronger differences in aggressiveness run contrary to such conceptions.

Keywords: Gender, gender roles, sex roles, presidents, news conferences, press conferences, journalism, questions

1. Introduction

What significance should be accorded to the personal attributes of individual journalists in the conduct of their work? This is an underdeveloped area of study in news media and political communication. Relative to the well-documented consequentiality of organizational and market structures, professional norms and conventions, and technological factors that transcend the individual reporter (e.g., Schudson 2000; Benson 2004; Williams and Carpini 2011), the import of individual-level attributes of those who actually produce news remains largely unexplored. Even in the politically charged area of partisan and ideological bias, extant research has focused mainly on the aggregate slant of the mainstream news media with remarkably meager results (D'Alessio and Allen 2000), and with few attempts to link news content patterns to the attitudes or affiliations of individual reporters. News media research has thus far been an arena for the triumph of institutional and technological perspectives on the production of culture.

It is against this backdrop that the question of gender in political journalism arises. According to nationwide surveys of U.S. journalists, what was once a heavily male-dominated domain has seen an influx of women into the profession. Relative to the early 1970s, the proportion of women has nearly doubled and now comprises more than a third of the overall workforce (Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit 2019). Although this proportion remains somewhat smaller than the female proportion of managers and professionals generally, the diversification of journalism along gender lines has far outpaced its racial/ethnic diversification and represents a substantial shift in the social demographics of the journalistic workforce. What does the partial feminization of the news media portend for the news product and for the political processes in which news is implicated?

Theorizing about gender in social life offers various contrasting expectations. On the one hand, the conception of gender as normatively organized in association with “masculine” and “feminine” ideals would anticipate women reporters practicing journalism “in a different voice” (Gilligan 1993) from that of men. This anticipated outcome would be much the same whether gender differences are viewed as role-structured (Komorovsky 1950; Hochschild 1973) or as emergent achievements (Goffman 1977; West and Zimmerman 1987); and whether such differences emanate directly from the varying dispositions of male and female reporters, or indirectly from the organizational environments in which they work. Consistent with the latter perspective, women broadcasters have commented on a felt pressure to “soften” their behavior so as to honor the feminine ideal (Stahl 1999, 102).

On the other hand, since women have traditionally been underrepresented in the news media workplace, a combination of self-selection into the profession plus on-the-job pressures might foster a pattern of overachievement by women on standards that have been institutionalized by men. The phenomenon of workplace minorities overcompensating in response to distinct performance pressures has been termed “the Avis Syndrome” (Sherman and Rosenblatt 1984) – an allusion to Avis Car Rental’s advertising slogan that, as the #2 rental company, “We Try Harder.” Correspondingly, some of the more famous female members of the White House press corps, such as Sarah McClendon and Helen Thomas, have reputations as formidable questioners.

There is also an entirely plausible null hypothesis. Gender may in the end be inconsequential, either because the cross-cutting pressures sketched above are co-equal and cancel each other out, or simply because the institutionalized demands of the professional role supersede any gendered dispositions or workplace preferences (cf., Kanter 1976).

Empirical research bearing on these competing hypotheses has yielded intriguing but somewhat mixed results. International surveys conducted in 18 countries, including the U.S., find reporters of both genders are indistinguishable in their

claimed allegiance to a common framework of role conceptions and professional values (Hanitzsch and Hanusch 2012). But some studies of actual work practices reveal subtle differences in topical emphases and styles of reportage. Male and female journalists have been associated, respectively, with political and other “hard” news topics versus “soft” news of health and human interest (Cann and Mohr 2001, Desmond and Danilewicz 2010). Women journalists have also been associated with a tendency toward using a wider and more inclusive range of information sources (Armstrong 2004; Zeldes and Fico 2005; Zeldes, Fico, and Didi 2007), although Cann and Mohr (2001) find no gender difference in sourcing patterns. Other masculinized/feminized stylistic differences have been found in campaign coverage, but only when disaggregated to distinguish executive from legislative races (Meeks 2013). The gender composition of the editorial staff has also been targeted as a factor in determining topical beat assignments and/or coverage styles (Beam and Di Cicco 2010; Correa and Harp 2011; Craft and Wanta 2004). Finally, using news conference data convergent with the present study, Meeks (2017) finds no significant gender differences for the vast majority of topical areas, but a significant tendency for women journalists to focus on civil rights/minority issues more than men, and a marginally significant tendency to address certain issues of the private sphere (family and social welfare) more than men.

The present study addresses this puzzle for the elite cadre of political journalists comprising the White House press corps. It uses data drawn from presidential news conferences, proceeding from the insight that contemporary journalists are not just story-tellers but also public inquisitors (Higgins 2010) whose craft includes the direct questioning of authority in pursuit of information and accountability (Schudson 1994). Questions have distinct affordances as units of analysis, being relatively compact, coherent, and hence amenable to coding and quantification. A focus on question design has thus proven to be a revealing window into journalistic norms, press-state relations, and sociopolitical conditions across a range of national contexts (e.g., Alfahad 2015; Clayman et al. 2006; Clayman 2017; Ekström et al. 2013; Ekström and Patrona 2011; Heritage and Clayman 2013; Huls and Varwijk 2011; Tolson 2012; Zhang and Shoemaker 2014). And since questions, unlike scripted stories, are not subject to editorial review or subsequent revision, they are particularly well-suited for investigating consequential attributes of the individual working journalist – including gender (Meeks 2017, 2018).

2. Data and methodology

The primary database for this study is a quarterly sample of U.S. presidential news conferences spanning the latter half of the 20th century (1953–2000). This database,

the basis for earlier papers on president-press relations in the postwar era (e.g., Clayman et al. 2006, 2007, 2010), focuses on solo conferences held at the White House, and encompasses 9 presidents, 12 administrations, 164 conferences, and 4608 questions. Subtracting those for which the questioner's gender could not be determined ($n = 356$ or 7.7% of the total) yields a usable sample of 4252 questions.

This database was subject to quantitative analysis of questions' topical content, as well as formal features embodying aggressiveness (drawing on the coding system developed in Clayman et al. 2006, 2007, discussed further below). This was supplemented with more detailed case-by-case analysis of individual questions from the earlier part of the sampling period, which both theory and our own research suggested was a time of greatest male dominance in the press corps and heightened gender differences (see also Clayman et al. 2012).

The analysis and results are presented in three stages. First we examine the distribution of questions by gender over time as a means of charting the increasing prominence of women journalists in the White House press corps. This is, of course, an imperfect measure of press corps membership *per se*, since the proportion of male/female questioners is contingent on both the pool of reporters present and the president's turn-by-turn selection of questioners. Nevertheless, in the absence of any consistent attendance record, it provides at least a rough proxy for broad historical trends in the press corps and a definitive measure of women reporter's expanding voice in this context. Next we examine gender similarities and differences in the topical content and focus of questions, and then do the same for aggressiveness in question design.

3. The feminization of the president's questioners

Press conference data suggests that the gender composition of the president's questioners in the White House press corps has undergone a substantial transformation, although the trend toward greater gender balance has been neither linear nor continuous. As Table 1 indicates, men dominated the questioning role from the 1950s through the early 1970s to a degree that held remarkably steady thorough that period. For more than two decades spanning the administrations Eisenhower through Nixon, some 90% of the questions were asked by male journalists, with fluctuations of less than 1.5% across presidents.

The growth of women questioners begins in the mid to late 1970s, the era of Presidents Ford and Carter, when the percentage of questions asked by women roughly doubled to around 20%. An even bigger increase, in absolute terms, occurred at the beginning of the 1980s, when this percentage rose to about 1/3 of the total. The trend would continue across subsequent administrations but at a much

Table 1. Questions (%) by male vs. female journalists, per administration *

	Eisenhower 1953-60	Kennedy 1961-63	Johnson 1964-68	Nixon 1969-74	Ford 1975-76	Carter 1977-80	Reagan 1981-88	Bush 1989-92	Clinton 1993-00
Male	88.59	89.37	90.75	90.08	80.57	78.87	65.04	62.25	59.17
Female	11.41	10.68	9.25	9.92	19.43	21.13	34.96	37.75	40.83
Total	100.00	100.00	100.0	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

*Percentages in Table 1 and Table 2 below are calculated from the universe of questions for which questioner's gender could be identified, amounting to 92.3% of all questions from 1953-2000; gender was unavailable for 7.7% of the cases.

slower pace, with each administration after Reagan seeing about a 3% increase in the proportion of female questioners relative to its predecessor.

By century's end, women journalists were responsible for 41% of all news conference questions. More recent research by Meeks (2018) on the middle years of Obama's second term (2014–2015) finds women comprising 39% of all gender-identifiable questioners, suggesting that the prominence of women may have plateaued at around the 40% level. While falling short of full gender equality, this elite Washington D.C. context appears to be slightly more balanced than in journalism nationwide (cf., Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit 2019).

So for an extended period dating back to the 1950s and probably earlier, the president's questioners comprised a heavily male-dominated occupational enclave. In fits and starts beginning in the mid-1970s, it has become more balanced in its gender composition, likely reflecting some combination of shifts in White House press corps membership, and in the selection of questioners. But what, if anything, has this transformation actually meant for the news product, in this case the manner in which the journalist's public inquisitor role has been enacted?

4. Topical content of questions

Consider, first, the topical substance of the questions being asked. It bears emphasis that the selection among topical agendas to pursue is not *necessarily* gendered. In our examination of the data, we were struck by the apparent salience of other (non-gender) identity elements in many cases, such as regional identities (e.g., Texas reporters asking about oil policy, Alaskan reporters in the early 1950s concerned with statehood), and racial/ethnic identities (African-American reporters questioning segregation, Jewish reporters on the Middle East). And most topical choices don't appear to be conditioned by any identity elements other than that of professional journalist, which is of course primarily operative in this work setting. How, then, might gender bear on these journalistic selections?

As an initial entry into this puzzle, we examined a broad topical distinction that was part of our earlier news conference project (Clayman et al. 2007), namely the distinction between questions focusing on (1) domestic affairs, (2) foreign affairs, or (3) military/national security affairs. When male and female journalists are compared in these terms, there is a high degree of similarity across journalists (see Table 2). For both genders, domestic issues are raised most frequently and comprise roughly half of the questions being asked. Foreign affairs are somewhat less frequent for both groups, and military/national security issues are a distant third. In sum, the order of preference among these three content categories remains constant for all journalists regardless of gender.

Table 2. Topical content of questions (%) by male vs. female journalists

	Domestic affairs	Foreign affairs	Military & Nat'l security	Total
Male	49.88	46.66	3.47	100.00
Female	52.71	42.74	4.56	100.00

Chi2 = 6.4388, $p < .04^*$

By the same token, a closer look at the distribution reveals a subtle difference in relative emphasis concentrated in the domestic and foreign categories. Female journalists favor domestic affairs a bit more than their male counterparts ($\approx 3\%$ differential), while males favor foreign affairs more than females do ($\approx 4\%$ differential). This difference in emphasis is not large by any means, but it is nonetheless statistically significant ($p < .04$). The difference, moreover, may be construed as at least broadly congruent with traditional gender stereotypes, with female journalists exhibiting a slight preference (relative to males) for the domestic arena, and male journalists slightly preferring (relative to females) the world beyond U.S. borders.

These topical categories are, of course, extremely broad; a more fine-grained examination of individual questions from the early years of our dataset (1950s and early 60s) suggest that the slight difference observable in Table 2 is indicative of a real underlying phenomenon. While journalists of many stripes raised economic issues (e.g., unemployment, inflation, regulatory policy, etc.) with great frequency, female reporters did so at times with a distinctive “hearth and home” focus that does not appear to be matched by male reporters from that era.

Consider this question to President Eisenhower from May Craig (a New England newspaper reporter) concerning government price supports for butter. Beyond the obvious kitchen-table resonance of such an issue, Craig underscores the everyday importance of reasonably priced butter (lines 3–5), later explicitly referencing the needs of “ordinary people” and “housewives” (15–16) in her pursuit of the matter.

(1) [Eisenhower, 2 April 1953: May Craig on butter prices]

1 Jrn: Mister (0.4) Pre:sident if- I: can- (0.6) get awa:y from:
2 high politics to butter .hh do you think there's anything
3 -> that you can do:: in the lo::ng te:rm so that people can get
4 -> (.) butter:: at reasonable prices and not have it sto:red
5 -> awa:y at taxpayers' expe:nse. .hh to spoi:l? (.) It's a long
6 term problem I kno::w, but it's a symbolic thing.
7 (0.6)
8 Pres: Well- (.) Of course you're talking about something that's-
9 (.) where you could- e- fa:r better go: to the Secretary of
10 A:griculture an' get a (.) rea:lly (1.6) definitive answer...

11 ((president's response continues))
 12 ((journalist's first follow-up question and response not shown))
 13 Jrn: Well si::r, if if th- you did not- your administration did
 14 no:t price support it, .h couldn't- you find an outle:t and
 15 -> the ordinary people buying it the housewi:ves, at a l- at
 16 -> th' price they could pa::y?=
 17 Pres: U::h uh I would sa::y, Miss Craig that you cannot possibly
 18 .h u::h (0.4) be guilty of lack of good faith (.) with your
 19 own people.=This- thing was done by la::w long before we
 20 came along...

In a similar vein, Texas journalist Sarah McClendon brings the economic abstraction of high interest rates down to earth with explicit reference to their “costly toll” for anyone financing “a home, an automobile, a refrigerator, or television set.”

(2) [Kennedy, 17 July 1963: Sarah McClendon on interest rates]

1 Jrn: Sir, I want to ask you something in view of yesterday's
 2 interest raise. I want to read you a little bit from the
 3 Democratic Party Platform of 1960: “A Democratic President
 4 will put an end to the present high interest tight money
 5 policy. This policy has failed in its stated purpose to
 6 keep prices down. The Republican high interest policy
 7 -> has extracted a costly toll from every American to has
 8 -> financed a home, an automobile, a refrigerator, or
 9 -> television set.” How can you reconcile this with what
 10 happened yesterday on interest rates?
 11 Pres: Because, as you study the statement made yesterday
 12 by the Federal Reserve...

And May Craig raises the fate of “the pitiful children” of West Virginia's unemployed coal miners who “have been starving for proper food” (lines 2–3), which then becomes the basis for a question about helping “needy Americans” (6–7).

(3) [Eisenhower 27 April 1960: May Craig on starving children]

1 Jrn: For more years than you have been in the White House,
 2 -> the pitiful children of the West Virginia unemployed
 3 -> coal miners have been starving for proper food. We do
 4 give them whatever surpluses we have. While you and
 5 congress talk about helping the needy in foreign countries,
 6 -> isn't there something that you could do for needy Americans
 7 in this rich America of our own?
 8 Pres: Well, Mrs. Craig, you say they haven't been helped.
 9 I thought they had...

Even questions primarily addressing military matters may incorporate such a hearth-and-home angle of emphasis. Consider this question about U.S. soldiers

stationed in Europe, which focuses in particular on how this is impacting family relations at a time when “spring is here” (line 7). After raising the question, the woman reporter comments that soldiers would perform better “if their wives and kids are with them” (8–10).

(4) [Kennedy 11 April 1962: Soldiers’ families]

- 1 Jrn: Mr. President, now that General Clay is coming home
 2 from Berlin, don't you think that the service wives
 3 have borne the brunt of our gold shortage long enough,
 4 and should be permitted to join their soldier husbands
 5 in Europe? After all, you can almost say that service
 6 couples have had to bear a cross of gold alone, and in
 7 a very lonely way. And spring is here and everyone knows
 8 that the GI's--[laughter]--get into much less trouble
 9 and do their jobs better if their wives and kids are
 10 with them.
 11 Pres: I agree. And, we're very sympathetic....

It bears re-emphasis that such hearth-and-home themes were by no means commonplace even in the earliest years of our sample, as the vast majority of questions by female journalists were topically indistinguishable from those asked by males (cf., the next three excerpts below). But they arose on occasion and imparted a distinct flavor to at least some of the questions raised by female journalists of that era.

5. Adversarial questioning

Turning next from content to the tenor of questioning, we draw on the multidimensional coding system developed in Clayman et al. (2006, 2007) for assessing aggressiveness in question design, and examine the predictive significance of gender through multivariate ordinal logistic regression. The models included a range of control variables that previous research had shown to be significant (Clayman et al. 2007), including attributes of reporters (e.g., print vs. broadcast, prominent vs. local, regular vs. occasional conference participants) and sociopolitical conditions (unemployment rate, interest rate, 1st vs. 2nd terms, topical content, the year of the press conference).¹ We focused on the three most sensitive outcome measures from previous research (Clayman et al. 2007), and found statistically significant gender differences for two of these measures, both showing female journalists to be *more aggressive* than their male counterparts.

1. For a fuller discussion of these models, see Clayman et al. 2012).

The clearest difference was in the propensity toward *adversarialness* – the extent to which questions expressed disagreement with the president or were overtly critical of administration policies or actions. Our coding system captures variations in the realization of an adversarial posture, which may be confined to a simple question or its preface, or may be elaborated throughout an extended question. Controlling for other journalistic attributes and for the sociopolitical conditions noted above, female journalists were significantly more adversarial than their male counterparts ($p < .05$). The difference was substantial and did not appear to vary significantly over time. Expressed as odds ratios (OR = 1.53), there was a >50% chance that any given question asked by a female journalist would be measurably more adversarial than a male journalist in similar circumstances.

To illustrate, here Sarah McClendon asserts that the President supports a bill that would exempt his own appointments from conflict-of-interest statutes (lines 1–6), which then becomes the basis for questioning the ethics of this policy that would enable him to “appoint bankers to investigate themselves” (7–8). Eisenhower, in response, defends the policy on pragmatic grounds (9–14) and disavows any intent to “appoint bankers entirely” (14–15).

(5) [Eisenhower, 3 April 1957: Sarah McClendon on conflict of interest]

- 1 Jrn: Sir, with regard to this commission that you might appoint
 2 for investigating the monetary situation, there are two
 3 bills, I believe, before Congress that have your support.
 4 One (phrase) of the bills calls for exemption from the
 5 conflict of interest statutes for the members whom
 6 you might appoint.
 7 I wonder if you might appoint bankers to investigate
 8 themselves?
 9 Pres: Well, I would think that anybody in the United States
 10 that is heavily engaged in business is certainly
 11 concerned with our monetary system. So if you would
 12 make a strict application of the conflict of interest
 13 laws, you might have a situation that no one of
 14 substance could serve... No, I don't think you would
 15 appoint bankers entirely, of course not.

Another ethical lapse is highlighted by this question from May Craig concerning a lack of transparency surrounding Eisenhower's then-recent heart attack. She asks specifically whether it was “right and proper” (line 1) to “conceal” the episode for so long from officials and from other physicians.

(6) [Eisenhower, 19 January 1956: May Craig on transparency]

- 1 Jrn: Mr. President, do you think it is right and proper that
 2 a White House physician should conceal from appropriate

- 3 officials for many hours the serious illness of a
 4 President; and, two, to refrain for many hours from
 5 calling in other physicians to consult on his diagnosis
 6 and early treatment?
 7 Pres: Well, you are asking what I assume to be a hypothetical
 8 question--[laughter]--because in my own case my doctor
 9 was in close contact, I think, with others very rapidly,
 10 certainly as soon as daylight came, and it was
 11 determined what to do about it.
 12 Jrn: Sir, I understood it was as much as 10 hours.

After Eisenhower defends his doctor's "very rapid" consultation (7–11), the journalist pursues the matter (12) by directly challenging the president's claim of swift consultation.

Finally, in a conference held following official Russian claims to have rocketed to the moon, Sarah McClendon highlights a disjuncture between Eisenhower's congratulatory stance versus scientists' skepticism toward such claims (lines 1–8). She then relays an accusation by "some people" that Eisenhower had been duped into aiding Russian propaganda (9–11).

(7) [Eisenhower, 29 April 1959: Sarah McClendon on the space race]

- 1 Jrn: Sir, on January the third the Russians made a claim
 2 that they had sent a rocket to the moon, and you,
 3 I believe the record of the Senate investigators
 4 showed, congratulated them on that very day,
 5 although our scientists did not seem to pick up
 6 a signal until the following day, and later there
 7 was great doubt among our scientists as to the
 8 claims made by Russia.
 9 Now, some people have thought that maybe your
 10 quick congratulations may have aided Russian
 11 propaganda in their claim to accomplishment.
 12 Would you—
 13 Pres: Well, if I did, I will say this, it was strictly
 14 unintentional. Now, I made a statement on the
 15 advice of the scientists... ((some lines omitted))
 16 Now you say I did it before it was accomplished.
 17 Not as far as the scientists told me.
 18 Jrn: Could you tell us who the scientists were?
 19 Were they in Government or outside of Government?
 20 Who advised you to go ahead with that?

This accusatory suggestion, advanced at the height of the Cold War, prompts Eisenhower to interject before her question is even completed (12–13) so as to deflect responsibility for the lapse. McClendon does not allow this defense to stand;

her subsequent pursuit of the matter (18–20) obliges him to, in effect, further defend his defense.

6. Assertive questioning

A less robust but nonetheless significant difference was also found for the prevalence of *assertiveness* in question design – the extent to which *yes/no* questions were markedly polarized toward a particular answer and were thus opinionated on the subject of inquiry. A “tilt” toward either *yes* or *no* can be encoded in two main elements of question design captured by our coding system: (1) prefatory statement(s), and (2) the interrogative form of the question itself, both illustrated in this reproduction of Excerpt 3.

(8) [Eisenhower 27 April 1960: May Craig on starving children]

- 1 Jrn: For more years than you have been in the White House,
 2 -> the pitiful children of the West Virginia unemployed
 3 -> coal miners have been starving for proper food. We do
 4 give them whatever surpluses we have. While you and
 5 congress talk about helping the needy in foreign countries,
 6 -> isn't there something that you could do for needy Americans
 7 in this rich America of our own?
 8 Pres: Well, Mrs. Craig, you say they haven't been helped.
 9 I thought they had...

Here the core question (lines 6–7) asks whether something can be done to help needy Americans. The statement preface, which references “pitiful children... starving for proper food” (2–3), and foreign aid to the needy abroad (4–5), provides an explicit rationale for an affirmative answer to the question of aiding those close to home “in this rich America of our own”. The statement preface thus overtly pushes for a *yes*-type answer.

This preference is subsequently reinforced by the linguistic form of the interrogative (lines 6–7) which is negatively formulated (“*isn't there* something...”). Negative interrogatives (e.g., *Isn't it*, *Don't you*, *Haven't they*, etc.) generally favor *yes*-type answers, so much so that they are often treated by recipients as opinion statements rather than information-seeking questions (Heritage 2002). So both the preface and the interrogative form in this case are convergently “tilted” in the same direction, making this a highly assertive *yes*-preferring question.

The assertiveness measure, which combines these two indicators, reveals a more complicated picture of gender differences. Females journalists were more assertive than males but this difference was statistically significant only in the early

years of our database, from the 1950s through most of the 60s. The difference diminished from 1969 onward, a time that roughly parallels the influx of women into the press corps (Table 1 above). Women were thus disproportionately assertive in their questioning mainly during the era when they comprised the smallest minority of the press corps, and their growing presence coincided with a steady convergence toward men on the assertiveness measure. To be clear, women were *not* becoming *less* assertive in this transformative era; *both* women and men were then asking more assertive questions, but the distance between them was diminishing from the 1970s to century's end.

Interestingly, three of the hearth-and-home questioning episodes examined earlier involved marked forms of assertiveness. In Excerpt 1, a question about butter prices was subsequently pursued through a negative interrogative follow-up question ("couldn't you," line 14) exerting pressure on the president to reduce prices. In Excerpt 3, a question about starving children mobilized both an assertive preface and a negative interrogative ("isn't there," line 6) to push for assistance. And in Excerpt 4, about families separated by military service, both a negative interrogative ("don't you," line 2) and a series of post-interrogative statements (lines 5–10) combine to urge the president to permit such families to be reunited. For another case along these lines from the Kennedy years, a question about legislation to promote drug purity and affordability includes an extended preface favoring the legislation (lines 1–5), as well as a two-part interrogative (6–7) suggesting executive action to implement the measure.

(9) [Kennedy, 12 April 1961: medicine purity and affordability]

- | | | |
|---|-------|--|
| 1 | Jrn: | Mr. President, Senator Kefauver and Representative Celler |
| 2 | | say that we must have legislation to bring down the prices |
| 3 | | of medicines for sick people and protect the purity of |
| 4 | | drugs. They have introduced legislation to do that by |
| 5 | | amending the patent and antitrust laws. |
| 6 | | Are you for that? Can you do anything executively, |
| 7 | | or can you do it through the Department of Justice? |
| 8 | Pres: | Well, I think that it may be that we can take some |
| 9 | | action executively without the Congress. . . |

Kennedy, in response, aligns with the preference of the question, embracing the idea of executive action that would bypass Congress on this matter.

But women journalists' assertiveness was by no means confined to the hearth-and-home arena. Here May Craig uses a negative interrogative to propose that the U.S. is falling behind in the nuclear arms race.

(10) [Eisenhower, 7 April 1954: May Craig on the arms race]

1 Jrn: Mr. President, aren't you afraid that Russia will make
 2 bigger hydrogen bombs before we do?
 3 Pres: No, I am not afraid of it...

Sarah McClendon uses the same negative interrogative form (arrowed below) to propose that administrative efforts to prohibit State Department communications with Congress are “a direct violation of the law.” And despite the president’s initial and possibly premature response (line 10), she continues to elaborate on the violation being asserted (11–12).

(11) [Kennedy, 9 October 1963: Sarah McClendon on transparency]

1 Jrn: Sir, there seems to be some connection between the attempt
 2 of State Department to discharge Mr. Otto Otepka, the
 3 Security Officer... [and] the fact that he gave much
 4 information to the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee
 5 about various employees of the State Department...
 6 Also Secretary Rusk has now put forth an order that
 7 employees of the State Department cannot talk or give
 8 information to this congressional committee.
 9 -> Isn't that a direct violation of the law?
 10 Pres: No, it isn't.
 11 Jrn: That government employees are allowed to give information
 12 to Members of Congress and to committees?

In a similar vein, Lillian Levy, of the National Jewish Post, develops an elaborate prefatory statement (lines 1–8) to urge the president to directly intervene in the Egypt-Israel conflict over access to the Suez Canal. Both the preface (e.g. 5–6) and the question (9–12) underscore Eisenhower’s own stake in the earlier Suez crisis, thereby heightening and personalizing the inducement for an affirmative response.

(12) [Eisenhower, 27 April 1960: Lillian Levy on Suez crisis]

1 Jrn: President Nasser recently stated that the Suez would
 2 remain closed to Israel's ships and shipping and that
 3 he has reached no understanding on this matter with you
 4 and Secretary General Hammarskjöld. Under your leadership,
 5 sir, the 1956 Suez crisis was resolved. At that time the
 6 United States again reaffirmed the broad principle of
 7 free access through the Suez for all nations and expressed
 8 its faith that Nasser would uphold this principle.
 9 Since Nasser has rejected it, are you considering now
 10 personal intervention, and do you have any reason to
 11 believe that your intervention would be less successful
 12 today than it was in '56?

- 13 Pres: I did say exactly what you said in 1956. Mr. Nasser has
 14 given as his reason for doing nothing since that time
 15 that they are in a state of war. . .

Such assertive questions are not necessarily successful; contrast the president's acquiescent response in Excerpt 9 with the blunt rejections in 10 and 11. But the extent to which female journalists were disproportionately assertive relative to males in the 1950s and 60s, and disproportionately adversarial throughout the sampling period, constitutes a pattern of professional conduct fundamentally at odds with gender stereotypes.

7. Discussion

We have documented the growing prominence of women in the White House press corps, and have begun to explore what this has meant for the actual practice of questioning presidents. The results suggest that various models of gender difference in the workplace each have some explanatory merit, but not equally so, and no model by itself can account for the full range of findings documented in this study of journalistic question design.

The topical content of questions reveals female and male journalists to be pursuing broadly similar topical agendas, both prioritizing the domestic policy arena over foreign policy and national security. Within this common framework, however, women exhibit a very slight preference (relative to men) for the domestic arena and men show a slight preference (relative to women) for the world beyond U.S. borders. This differential is small in absolute terms (3 to 4%), but it is statistically significant in our large database and ostensibly congruent with gender stereotypes or ideals. It is, moreover, reinforced by our more fine-grained analysis of questions from the 1950s and early 1960s, which revealed female journalists to be raising issues with an occasional focus on "domesticity" in the more proximate sense of home economics, family relations, and the needs of children. These private sphere themes were by no means frequent even for women journalists of that era, the vast majority of whose questions were topically indistinguishable from those of men. But such themes were the distinctive province of the press corps' female members, evident in the questions asked by both frequent participants like May Craig and Sarah McClendon as well as some more occasional participants. Moreover, research by Meeks (2018) suggests that a gender difference of this sort continues to shape press conference questioning beyond the 1960s.

By contrast, the findings for aggressiveness in question design run largely contrary to gender stereotypes, a pattern consistent with the Avis phenomenon (Sherman and Rosenblatt 1984) for women in the workplace. Women journalists

were on the whole more adversarial than men, hence more apt to express disagreement with presidents and raise criticisms of their policies and actions. They were also more assertive than men, their yes/no questions pushing more strongly for a particular type of answer. Unlike adversarialness, the difference in assertiveness was a less enduring phenomenon of the early decades of our dataset; it diminished after 1968, a time that coincides with the influx of women into the White House press corps. This historical pattern is highly consistent with the Avis phenomenon, with women outperforming men on traditionally “masculine” standards of conduct primarily when they represented a small minority in the workplace.

Taken together, the various findings encompass differences that are congruent with as well as contrary to traditional conceptions of gender, but these alternative patterns are clearly not created equal. What emerges as the strongest empirical difference (women being more adversarial than men, and more assertive in the early years) runs directly contrary to idealized notions of masculinity and femininity. Conversely, the differences that are congruent with gender traditions (women slightly favoring domestic policy, and hearth-and-home themes at least in the early years) are empirically weak and explain relatively little of the variance in question design.

These findings may inform our understanding of broader historical trends U.S. journalism. Many plausible explanations have been offered for the increasingly adversarial tenor of president-press relations since the late 1960s, with varying levels of explanatory power (Clayman et al. 2010). Perhaps the diversification of the press corps along gender lines is one piece of this complex historical puzzle, a previously unrecognized factor in emergence of a more vigorous and vigilant press corps.

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