Performativity in Politics: Understanding the Role of Affect in Political News Coverage

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Abstract: The United States Democratic primaries for the 2020 election kicked off with an incredibly diverse pool of candidates with regards to gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status. However, as the primaries progressed and the pool of candidates narrowed, voters elected to nominate Joe Biden—a white man in his late seventies—to take on Donald Trump in November, 2020. Given the similarity between Elizabeth Warren's platform and Bernie Sanders', the purpose of this paper is to explore how news-media coverage contributes to the role of gender in campaigns for president in the United States. Grounded in a theoretical understanding of gender performativity in politics, this study uses a quantitative sentiment analysis of newspaper articles about both candidates to understand whether reporters expressed underlying sentiments differing based on the candidates' gender. Articles were selected from The New York Times (NYT), The Washington Post (WaPo), National Public Radio (NPR), The Associated Press (AP), and the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) to represent the diversity of reputable, mainstream news outlets considered to have minimal partisan bias available to the American public. Though the sentiment analysis revealed no significant difference in reporting across the different sources by candidate, factors such as rules for news publications and the nuances in political orientation of the two candidates may have limited the role of sentiment in contributing to political gender bias in this case study. This research is of broad interest as it sheds light on the current gendered political landscape in the United States, where a female president has yet to be elected. Furthermore, this study explores the within-party gender dynamics in reporting, in contrast to the myriad studies published in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election in which Hillary Clinton lost to Donald Trump.

Keywords: gender performativity; politics; affect; sentiment analysis; elections; news media

1. Introduction

The Democratic primaries for the 2020 election kicked off with an expansive and incredibly diverse pool of candidates with regards to gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status (Enten, 2019). Ahead of the first caucus in Iowa, Elizabeth Warren and Amy Klobuchar were polling as part of the top five candidates still in the race for the nomination in addition to the three male frontrunners at the time (*Latest Polls - President: Democratic Primary*, 2020). As the primaries progressed and the pool of candidates narrowed considerably, however, voters elected to nominate Joe Biden, a white man in his late seventies, to take on Donald Trump in November, 2020. Despite running on powerful policy platforms, having extensive credentials and experience, and delivering powerful debate performances, the rhetoric surrounding these campaigns makes it clear that women face higher scrutiny and greater obstacles to successful campaign outcomes than their male counterparts. Particularly since the 2016 election, much research has focused on exploring the root causes of the obstacles women in politics face (Paul and Smith, 2008; see Bock, Byrd-Craven and Burkley, 2017; Ditonto, 2019; Ratliff *et al.*, 2019; Monteith and Hildebrand, 2020).

Given the similarity between Elizabeth Warren's platform and Bernie Sanders'—who had a formidable showing the primaries before ceding victory to Joe Biden—the purpose of this paper is to explore how news-media coverage contributes to the role of gender in presidential campaigns in the United States. Specifically, this paper analyzes whether newspaper articles about Bernie Sanders portrayed different underlying sentiments than those about Elizabeth Warren. It is important to shed light on the extent to which reporters express underlying sentiments that differ based on gender, given that particularly for the high-profile presidential election, information processing is just one step in a voter's months-long decision-making process. Furthermore, candidate gender can influence myriad political behaviors among the voting public including: the amount of information a potential voter seeks about a candidate, what sources are consulted, and how they choose to interpret "gender-neutral" information. The information available about women candidates more significantly influences perceptions of their competence than coverage of their male counterparts does (Ditonto, 2019). The foundation of this analysis will center around Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity as the basis for understanding the possible influence of candidate's gender on campaign success.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Gender performativity

Austin (1962) defined the notion of 'a performative' as a statement which that equates to the performance of an action. Though an individual's intention is a crucial component in producing the desired effect of a performative, Jacques Derrida suggested that the coherent and similar repetition of a performative across temporal and spatial contexts is what renders performatives intelligible (Chambers and Carver, 2008). Gender is a performative because it can be thought of as "the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, the appearance of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990, p. 45).

The binary heterosexual matrix governs not only the importance of masculinity and femininity, but the behaviors, attitudes, and practices associated with each (Butler, 1993). Gender expression is rendered intelligible insofar as "dress, behavior and gesture always signal sex and gender *together*; the accumulation of these enactments produces a body presumptively sexed male or female" (Chambers and Carver, 2008, pp. 39–40). Performances of gender that conform to the regulatory norms are considered natural while those that transgress such norms are considered inappropriate and unintelligible (Ehrlich and Meyerhoff, 2014).

2.2 Gender in politics

Gender performativity is a useful concept in politics because, given that Americans continue to associate leadership roles with men, women who seek higher status positions face degrading and diminishing backlash penalizing them for "their power-seeking intentions" (Wilz, 2016; Ratliff *et al.*, 2019, p. 579). Women who run for political office are seen as transgressing gendered boundaries because the stereotypical normative expectations associated with femininity are fundamentally at odds with the behavioral expectations associated with political leadership (Bauer, 2013; Wilz, 2016). Masculinist norms are deeply embedded in politics, creating "a performative bind for women" (Bauer, 2013, p. 22) wherein they are expected to "discursively enact their femininity" (Campbell, 1998), while simultaneously "'measur[ing] up' to certain standards of manliness" (Katz, 2016, p. 233). Those who fail to strike the appropriate balance between masculinity and femininity not only face challenges in their campaigns, but also are subject to degradation, diminishment, intense hostility, and differential treatment (Campbell, 1998; Wilz, 2016). In politics, a particular performance of masculinity is associated with the required competency to occupy the position of president. This produces a self-fulfilling cycle wherein, because a woman has yet to occupy this position, they face a higher level of scrutiny and must meet a higher threshold of competency to gain an individual voter's confidence and support (Paul and Smith, 2008).

3. Methodology - sentiment analysis

3.1 Understanding affect

The "affective turn" (Clough and Halley, 2007) that has emerged since the 1990s has legitimated affect, emotions, and feelings as objects of social scientific inquiry (Cifor, 2016). The study of affect considers these objects as an expansive dimension of human experience and interaction that can provide additional insight into the ways in which bodies are organized, marked, perceived, and related (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Wetherell, 2012; Cifor, 2016). Affects themselves, though there is no universal definition, are typically thought of as the "forces or intensities" (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p. 2) that circulate between and among bodies, informing both one's sense of place in the world and how "power is constituted, circulated and mobilized" (Cifor, 2016, p. 10).

Inequalities are exacerbated by affect because emotions create and reinforce the boundaries around different collectives by transforming feelings into attributes of bodies (Ahmed, 2004). Affect becomes a source, for example, for policing gender performativity, ensuring that people perform their gender appropriately or face consequences from their peers. Thus, affect is important in political arenas where "politically salient ways of being and knowing are produced through affective relations and discourses" (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012, p. 116). This means that women political candidates must espouse political norms encoded as masculine while facing consequences for transgressing norms of femininity. Because affect theory offers the "needed avenues for challenging dominant normative structures through which power, privilege and oppression are enacted"

(Cifor, 2016, p. 27) an examination of affect as it circulates throughout election campaign cycles can highlight the sources of oppression women face in running for the presidency.

3.2 Analyzing affect through sentiment analysis in R

One approach to analyzing text taking affect into account is through a sentiment analysis. Sentiments, similar to affect, are attitudes and emotions that have a polarity (are positive or negative), a source (a person or group holding the sentiment), and a target (an object towards which the sentiment is directed) (Fink *et al.*, 2011). This method involves identifying and extracting subjective information from textual sources to determine an author's attitude towards a particular object, the author's emotional state while writing, or the emotions the author wishes to convey to the reader (Hovy, 2015). The two primary outcomes of interest of sentiment analysis are the quantitative measures of polarity, i.e. whether a document and its expressions indicate positive or negative sentiments and opinions, and the main emotions that emerge through authorial word choice (Nasukawa and Yi, 2003; Khoo, Nourbakhsh and Na, 2012).

For the purposes of this analysis, the Bing lexicon developed by Bing Liu (2004) which scores a word as positive (+1), negative (-1), or neutral (0), and the NRC lexicon, a crowdsourced lexicon which tags words as positive, negative, or according to one of eight emotions: anger, fear, anticipation, surprise, acceptance, rejection, joy, or sadness (Mohammad and Turney, 2013). A word is scored as positive or negative by assessing it within the context of its four preceding and two following words to determine the presence of negators like "not" and valence shifters like "very" that might change the polarity of an identified word. Using sentiment analysis, the polarity scores (positive and negative scores) and the distribution of the eight different emotions were compared for articles with Bernie Sanders-specific headlines and Elizabeth Warren-specific articles to determine if there is a significant difference in reporting about each of these candidates.

3.3 Selection criteria

For this analysis, articles were selected from five news sources: The New York Times (NYT), The Washington Post (WaPo), National Public Radio (NPR), The Associated Press (AP), and the Wall Street Journal (WSJ). The choice of these five sources represents the diversity of reputable, mainstream news outlets available to the American public from billionaire-owned to publicly-funded to industry-slanted. News sources that are considered to have minimal partisan bias and focus on fact reporting were chosen (Langlois, 2018). The search was limited to January 1, 2020 to March 5, 2020, representing the run up to the first Primary contest in Iowa on February 3, 2020 through Elizabeth Warren's decision to drop out of the race after 'Super Tuesday' on March 3, 2020. This period reflects the rapidity with which Warren went from entering the new year as a front-runner alongside Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden, and Pete Buttigieg to suspending her campaign after failing to win a majority of delegates even in her home state of Massachusetts. The search terms "Warren" and "Sanders" were used, filtering to articles where these names appeared in the headline. This allowed for a focus on articles about a specific candidate rather than the general pool of candidates or the election as a whole. All of the articles that fit these criteria from each source were included. Overall, there were significantly fewer articles specific to Elizabeth Warren-specific headlines than to Bernie Sanders (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of articles by candidate and news source

	New York Times	National Public Radio	Associated Press	Wall Street Journal	Washington Post	Total by Candidate
Elizabeth Warren	25	4	34	24	16	**103**
Bernie Sanders	72	18	110	112	79	**391**
Total by Source	**97**	**22**	**144**	**136**	**95**	**494**

4. Results

4.1 Positive and negative polarity

The average polarity score for each candidate showed that both candidates were spoken about positively overall, though Warren had a higher positive polarity score and lower negative polarity score than Sanders

(Figure 1 and Figure 2). Similar words contributed to these positive and negative scores for each candidate, though their frequency differed slightly (Figure 3 and Figure 4). For example, though "critic" and "rival" were among the twenty most score influencing words for both candidates, "rival" was the most influential for Warren (Figure 3) compared to "critic" for Sanders (Figure 4).
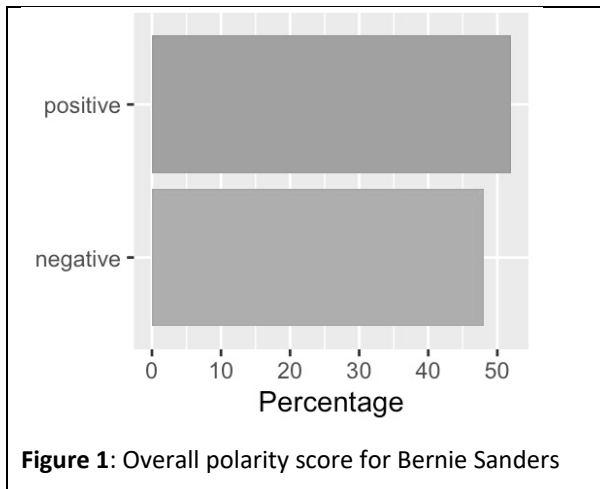

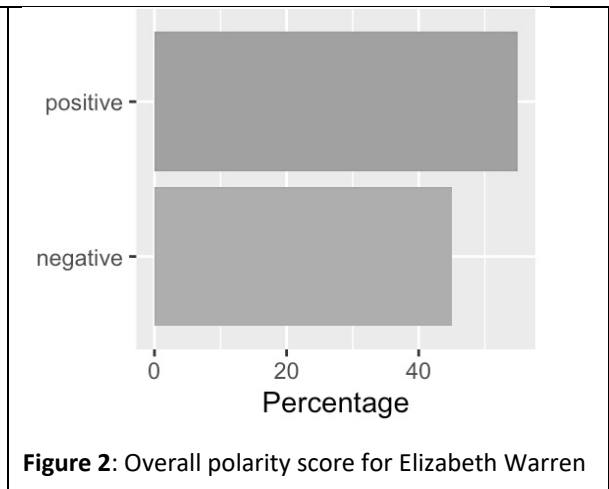**Figure 1**: Overall polarity score for Bernie Sanders

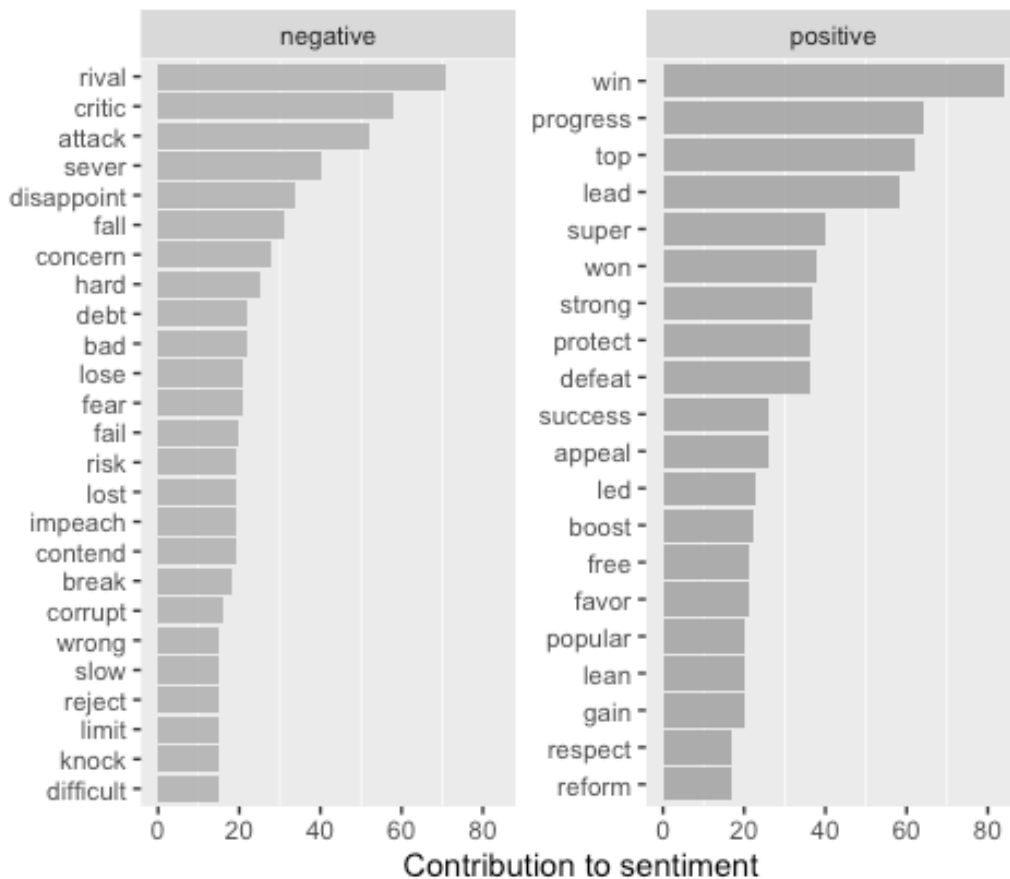**Figure 2**: Overall polarity score for Elizabeth Warren

Figure 3: Word contribution to sentiment for Elizabeth Warren

Boxplot graphs by news source (Figure 5), representing the quartile distribution of scores for each candidate showed a more positive score for Elizabeth Warren on average for the Associated Press, National Public Radio, and the Washington Post, though the median scores (represented by the thick line at the center of each box) were almost identical for the two candidates in articles by the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. The range of scores for the two candidates was also similar for the Associated Press; however, for the rest of the sources, the range of scores was larger for articles about Bernie Sanders than Elizabeth Warren. It is possible that the larger number of articles specific to Sanders contributes to the presence of a wider range of scores.
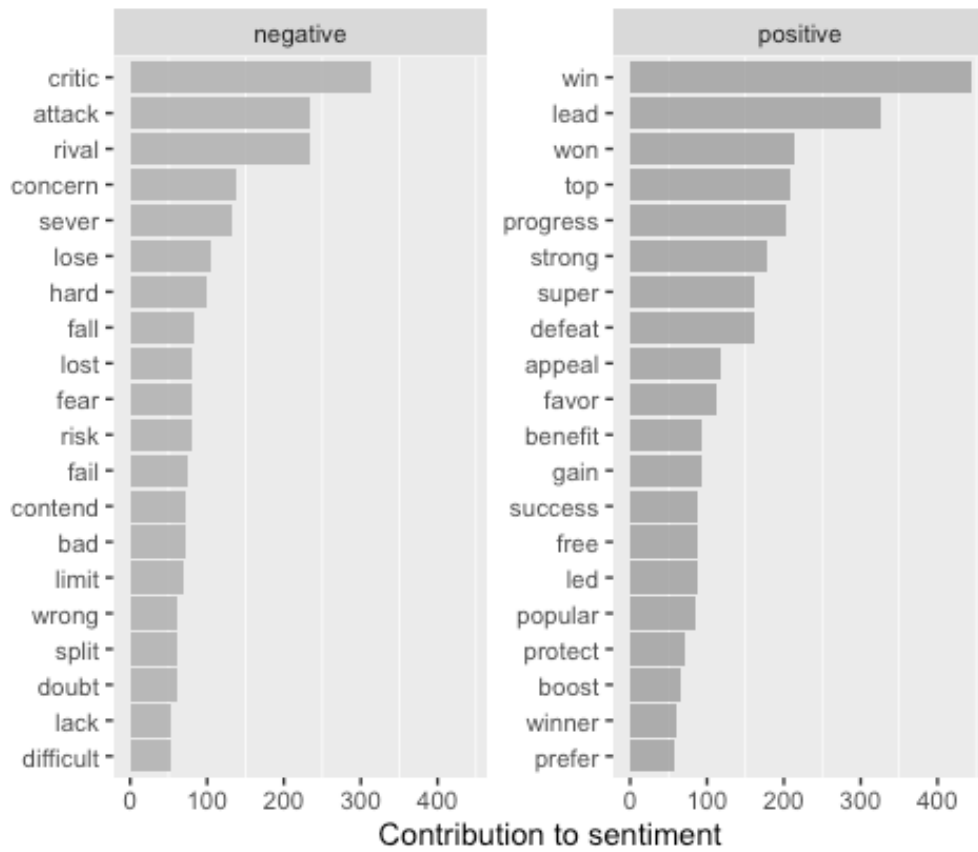
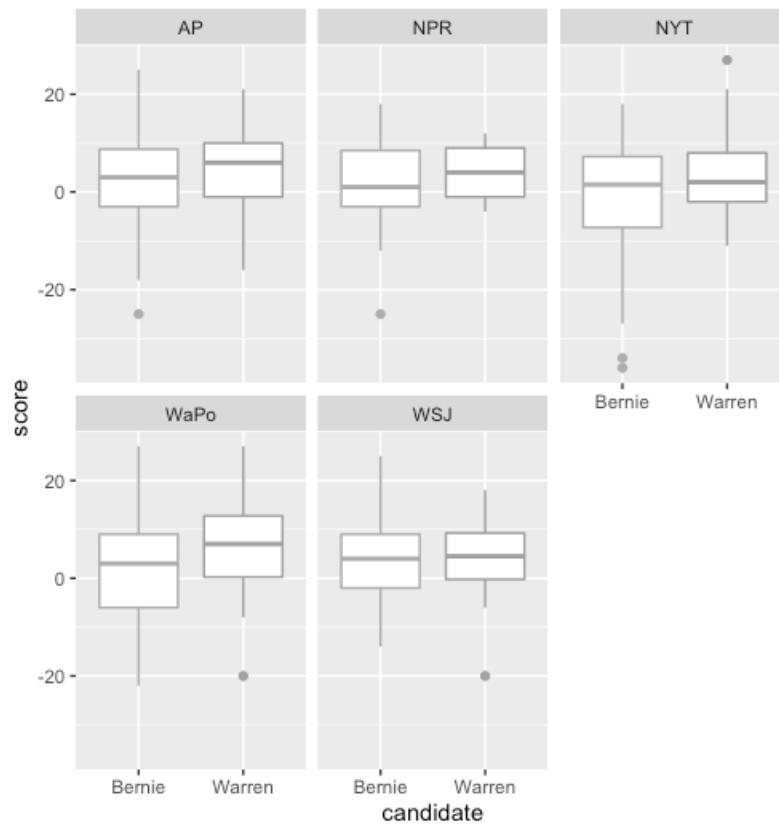**Figure 4**: Word contribution to sentiment for Bernie Sanders

Figure 5: Boxplot of candidate polarity score by source

4.2 Emotion-Related word scores

With regards to specific emotion-related words, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren both scored highly with trust and saw similar distributions for the other seven emotions (Figure 6 and Figure 7). Elizabeth Warren scored more highly on joy (10.8%) than anger (10.56%) and sadness (9.89%) (Figure 6), whereas Bernie Sanders scored more highly on anger (11.55%) and sadness (10.17%) than joy (10.38%) (Figure 7).
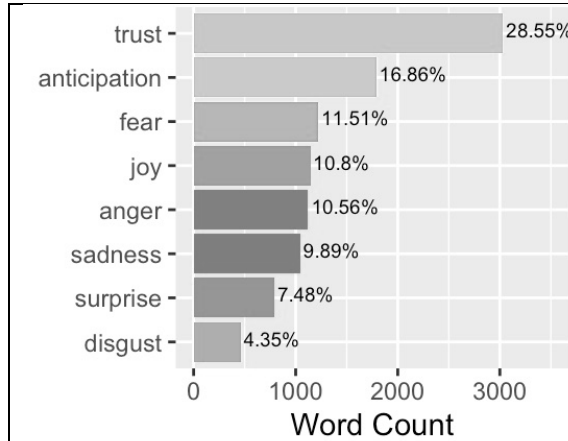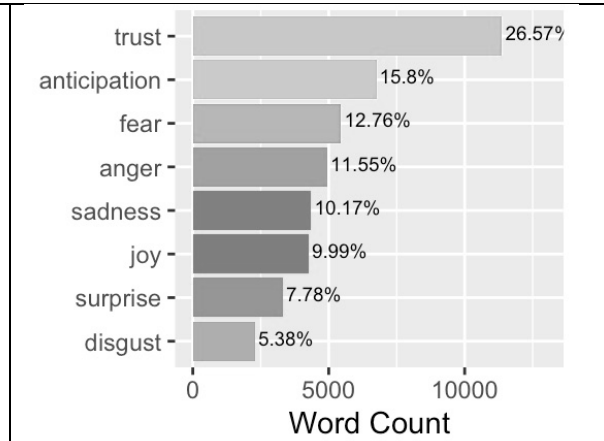

Figure 6: Elizabeth Warren sentiment breakdown | **Figure 7**: Bernie Sanders sentiment breakdown

5. Discussion

5.1 Overall observations

The results indicate that there was no significant difference in sentiment across the different sources by candidate, though there was slightly more positivity associated with Warren than Sanders. The lack of stark difference in polarity and sentiment that emerges does not, however, mean that gender does not play a role in determining political outcomes. As discussed above, women face greater obstacles towards political success than their male counterparts in the United States political landscape. The results of this study do not negate the impact of gender on candidate success, but rather suggest that this effect is not clearly apparent at the level of reporter sentiment. There are two main reasons why there may not have been differential sentiment between reports on Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders in this particular study: news coverage and perceptions of campaign viability

5.2 News coverage

Since the 1970s, many major news publishers have had guidelines in place promoting the use of "politically correct" language, including avoiding sexist language (Cameron, 1995). However, despite these guidelines and the widely held belief by many media consumers that their preferred news source is a neutral, objective, fact-based source of information, it is rarely the case that these news sources do not exhibit some sentiment or bias (Godbole, Srinivasaiah and Skiena, 2007, p. 1). In fact, particularly with the rapid expansion of online media consumptions, "news expresses opinions regarding news entities, which may comprise of people, places, or even things, while reporting on events that have recently occurred" (Taj, Shaikh and Fatemah Meghji, 2019, p. 1).

As noted above, news sources that are typically considered to be centrist and unbiased were chosen (Figure 1). This would suggest that any sentiment that emerged would be relatively balanced between positive and negative, and supports the finding of only slight variation in sentiment towards Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Had it been possible to include Jacobin (openly left-leaning) and the National Review (openly rightwing) as initially intended, it is possible that such explicitly skewed sources might have exhibited a more significant difference between the candidates and more dramatic positive or negative polarity overall.

Though sentiment and polarity were similar between the two candidates, the effects of gender bias in media reporting becomes clearer when looking at the number of articles written about Bernie Sanders as compared to Elizabeth Warren. Studies have shown that female candidates typically receive less coverage in the news than

their male peers (Bauer, 2013). Across all of the news sources, coverage favored writing articles about Sanders over Warren. Though Warren was a front-runner throughout the fall of 2019 and showed promise in polls leading up to the first primary contest, it is possible that the imbalanced news coverage might have influenced the level of support she received when it came time to vote. Candidates may have opted to vote for the progressive candidate on whom they had received more information, Bernie Sanders, particularly given that voters often seek out more information about female candidates (Ditonto, 2019) and may not have found sufficient sources to instill confidence in Warren's competence.

Additionally, there were several high-profile events in the fall and early spring that may have influenced primary coverage and outcomes. In the fall Donald Trump faced impeachment proceedings and the new year began with a dramatic escalation of military tension between the United States and Iran, followed by the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to the impact of Covid-19 on voters' day to day lives and the logistics of hosting primaries, expansive news coverage of these major events might have drawn attention away from the primary contest.

5.3   News source perception of candidate campaign viability

Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders ran on a similar progressive policy platform that underscored the importance of student loan debt relief, 'Medicare for all,' and taxation for the country's richest citizens. The similarity in the sentiments that emerged in the analysis may be related to what has been termed a "centrist bias" in the media. This bias refers to the "instinctual suspicion of anything suggesting ideological zealotry" (Leonhardt, 2019). Despite the tendency of many, including Donald Trump, to claim a liberal bias in the media, news sources often cast doubt and suspicion on candidates like Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders who openly advocate changing the status quo in dramatic ways (Leonhardt, 2019). As shown in Figures 1 and 2, though the candidates' polarity scores were skewed positive overall, this positive slant was not dramatic—approximately 45% negative and 55% positive for Bernie Sanders and 40% negative and 60% positive for Elizabeth Warren.

Elizabeth Warren, however, is a registered democrat with a history as a registered Republican, while Bernie Sanders is officially registered as an independent and positions himself as a democratic socialist (Thompson, 2019). It is possible that Sanders' positioning as such contributed to an ongoing sense that Warren was, however progressive, a more centrist choice than Bernie Sanders. If one accepts that there is a "centrist bias" in the media, a comparatively moderate Warren would be more palatable to the Democratic establishment regardless of her gender. Portraying Warren as a more moderate version of Sanders may have contributed to the slightly more positive sentiments that emerged in articles about Warren compared to Sanders. It is possible that a comparison of Warren to a true centrist like Pete Buttigieg or Joe Biden might have shown different emerging sentiments, and may have pointed more clearly to the role that gender might have played in news source framing of candidates.

Similarly, it is possible that the association of both candidates with a left-leaning, liberal agenda might have contributed to similar sentiments between the two candidates. Research has frequently shown that more conservative, Republican discourses tend to follow normative gender scripts more faithfully than Democratic discourses of liberalism and that members of the political right have successfully linked liberalism to "weakness, dependency, and helplessness—qualities seen by most male-dominant societies as feminine" (Ducat, 2004, p. 6; Gibson and Heyse, 2010). This framing positions all "progressive politics—like care for the environment, gay and lesbian civil rights, and government regulations of corporate behavior— […] as feminine" (Gibson and Heyse, 2010, p. 237). It is possible, then, that both Warren and Sanders faced a certain degree of sexism insofar as their advocacy for a progressive political agenda marks a transgression of gender norms and a failure to perform gender "correctly" in and of itself, regardless of the candidate's own gender. In fact, this may have contributed to Bernie Sanders' failure to secure the democratic nomination against Hillary Clinton in 2016.

Research on the 2016 election cycle and Hillary Clinton's loss consistently highlights the role of gender in news coverage as well as politics more broadly. In addition to the above points, it is possible that gender played a more significant role in 2016 than in 2020 because, once Clinton secured the Democratic nomination, she faced Donald Trump, the Republican nominee who was more overtly sexist (Monteith and Hildebrand, 2020). Both news coverage and comments made by Trump focused on Clinton's appearance and temperament, as opposed to her extensive qualifications (Bock, Byrd-Craven and Burkley, 2017). His comments readily invoked hostile sexist rhetoric, which conveyed actively antagonistic attitudes towards women (Ratliff *et al.*, 2019; Monteith

and Hildebrand, 2020). It is possible that we would have seen a similar dynamic had Warren faced Trump in 2020, however, the contestation for the Democratic nomination consisted of more covert sexism, a nuanced version of sexism characterized by a denial of ongoing discrimination coupled with "antagonism toward women's demands, and lack of support for policies designed to help women" (Ditonto, 2019, p. 593). As such, news coverage of the candidates, particularly if oriented towards fact-based reporting, would not show sexist sentiments as prominently. A sentiment analysis comparing articles about Hillary Clinton to Donald Trump might have shown a higher prevalence of sentiments like disgust and anger, as well as an overall negative polarity score for Clinton as compared to Trump.

6. Conclusion

Studies have shown that "readers and viewers do not necessarily consume texts in straightforward or predictable ways" (Ehrlich and Meyerhoff, 2014, p. 9), pointing to the possibility that voters' underlying beliefs and biases can influence how a text is interpreted, regardless of the author's emotional intent. Consumers of media frequently draw inferences that go beyond the surface-level meaning of a text based on their pre-existing gender- and sexuality-related ideologies (Ehrlich and Meyerhoff, 2014). Whether or not a text explicitly discusses or exhibits gender-based bias, consumers often read the information through their own understandings and beliefs about gender (McConnell-Ginet, 2014; Ditonto, 2019). Though these particular news sources did not point to the role that gender plays in political reporting, it is possible that the consumers of the different articles will still draw gender-related conclusions about the candidates, which could ultimately inform their voting choices. It is, therefore, important to explore the role that gender plays in politics from all potential sources and to understand whether biased beliefs about gender are already held by the voter or reinforced by sources like the media, because "sexist attitudes are indeed relevant to voting behavior over and above political ideology and other group-based attitudes" (Ratliff *et al.*, 2019, p. 589). Studies have shown that perceptions about competency influence vote choice, and in hypothetical presidential election scenarios men consistently received higher ratings for effectiveness than equally qualified women candidates (Paul and Smith, 2008). Conducting a sentiment analysis to determine if certain news sources contribute to such biases might allow readers to judge a source's credibility and understand the extent to which it might be trying to manipulate readers' judgment by relying on emotional communication (Aker *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, understanding the underlying reasons why gender plays a role in determining political outcomes is most useful if the contributing sources can be identified. This would allow a more systematic and effective approach to addressing any bias that might negatively impact women candidate's performance in ways that would not have affected her if she were a man.

Areas for further research include broadening the scope of the analysis to include true centrist candidates like Joe Biden and Pete Buttigieg so as to control for the role of political orientation, and including candidates like Kamala Harris and Cory Booker, both candidates of color to understand the role that race might have played in the primaries.

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