

“Wildrose Wild Card”: Alberta Newspaper Coverage of the 2009 Wildrose Alliance Leadership Contest

Linda Trimble and Angelia Wagner

Department of Political Science, University of Alberta. E-mail address: ltrimble@ualberta.ca; angelia@ualberta.ca

Abstract. This study uses quantitative and qualitative methods to examine Alberta newspaper coverage of the Wildrose Party’s 2009 leadership contest. We compared the overall visibility of the two candidates, Danielle Smith and Mark Dyrholm, and contrasted news framing of their public and private personas and assessments of their ideological positions and leadership skills. Smith was more visible than her male opponent, reflecting her front-runner status during the leadership race. Somewhat surprisingly, Smith was not framed as a woman candidate, nor were evaluations of her performance marked by sexism or gender stereotypes. We argue that these findings are atypical and other women leadership contenders are not likely to receive the glowingly positive assessments Smith enjoyed. Smith’s conservative ideological position, and the possibility that she had the skills and public appeal necessary to topple the long-standing governing party, prompted the remarkably adulatory coverage accorded her candidacy by the Alberta press corps.

Keywords. Alberta, gender, media, newspapers, political parties, leadership, Wildrose Party.

Introduction

When she was elected to lead Alberta’s Wildrose Alliance Party (now called the Wildrose Party) on October 17, 2009, Danielle Smith became one of only a handful of women party leaders. At that time, six women headed competitive political parties in Canada.¹ Sylvia Bashevkin argues that there have

Résumé. Cette étude utilise des méthodes quantitatives and qualitatives pour examiner comment la lutte pour la direction du Parti Wildrose en 2009 a été couverte par les quotidiens en Alberta. Nous avons comparé la visibilité d’ensemble des deux candidats, Danielle Smith et Mark Dyrholm, et avons mis en contraste le cadrage des médias au sujet de leur image publique et privée, ainsi qu’une estimation de leur position idéologique et de leurs compétences de direction. Smith était plus visible que son adversaire de sexe masculin, ce qui reflète son statut de favori durant la course à la tête du parti. Ce qui a été quelque peu surprenant, c’est que Smith n’a pas été dépeinte comme une candidate femme; les évaluations de ses résultats n’ont pas été empreintes de sexisme ou de stéréotypes genrés. Nous soutenons que ces résultats sont atypiques et que d’autres femmes candidates à la direction de partis ne recevront sans doute pas les évaluations élogieuses que Smith dont Smith a bénéficiées. La position idéologique conservatrice de Smith, et la possibilité qu’elle ait les compétences et l’attrait public nécessaire pour faire basculer le parti de gouvernement déjà ancien, ont incité la presse albertaine à mener une couverture médiatique élogieuse de sa candidature.

Mots clefs. Alberta, genre, médias, quotidiens, partis politiques, direction, Parti Wildrose.

been so few women in the top party jobs because a “women plus power equals discomfort syndrome” places daunting obstacles in the paths of women who aspire to political leadership roles (2009: 2). This discomfort has been reflected in media coverage of women politicians, especially party leaders (Bashevkin, 2009: 40-43). If deeply entrenched assumptions about gender roles continue to animate media representations of female contenders, they ought to be revealed by news reporting of recent party leadership campaigns. During these contests, media attention is focused on the leading candidates and reportage offers detailed descriptions and evaluations of their backgrounds, ideas and campaign performances. Our study analyzes coverage of the inaugural Wildrose leadership contest published in eight Alberta daily

1 We define competitive political parties as those holding at least one legislative seat at the time the leader was chosen. This definition thus excluded national Green Party leader Elizabeth May until she won a seat in the House of Commons in the 2011 federal election. In October 2009, when Smith won the Wildrose Alliance leadership race, there were five other women leaders of competitive parties: Carole James, leader of the BC NDP; Andrea Horwath, leader of the Ontario NDP; Parti Québécois lead-

er Pauline Marois; Lorraine Michael, who heads the Newfoundland NDP; and Yukon NDP leader Elizabeth Hanson.

newspapers. We employed quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess portrayals of the candidates, Danielle Smith and Mark Dyrholm, comparing overall visibility in the coverage and descriptions of their public and private personas, as well as evaluations of their campaign performances, leadership skills and electoral viability.

We begin our exploration of the news coverage by situating the Wildrose leadership contest, and Smith's candidacy, within its political and media context. The second section outlines the concept of gendered mediation and reviews the literature on media coverage of female politicians. After describing our methodology, we detail our findings on three measures: candidate visibility, framing and evaluation. Overall, we found that Smith's sex was not a barrier to her quest for the party's leadership. In fact it may have been an advantage, as Alberta newspaper coverage positioned Smith as the "Wildrose wild card," the candidate most likely to put a thorn in the side of the ruling Progressive Conservative Party (Gunter, 2009). Although we did not find evidence of gender bias in the form of overt gender stereotyping, we argue that gendered mediation was reflected in the news value accorded Smith's leadership bid by the Alberta press, as well as in positive evaluations of Smith's ideology.

The Wildrose Case Study

The Wildrose Alliance Party of Alberta was formed in January 2008 out of a merger between the Alberta Alliance and the Wildrose Party. Paul Hinman, Alberta Alliance leader at the time and the party's only sitting member in the Alberta legislature, was named the first leader. However, the newly formed party fared badly in the March 2008 provincial election, as it garnered less than seven per cent of the popular vote and failed to elect a single MLA (Alberta, 2010). Having lost his own seat, Hinman announced that he would step down at the party's June 2009 convention, opening the door to new leadership aspirants. The contest initially featured three contenders: Danielle Smith, a former journalist and Alberta director of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business; Mark Dyrholm, a Calgary chiropractor; and author Jeff Willerton. Willerton withdrew his candidacy in mid-September, throwing his support to Dyrholm (Mabell, 2009). Despite Willerton's backing, Dyrholm lost to Smith on the first ballot.

The Wildrose leadership contest provides a valuable case study of media coverage of female and male leadership contenders, as the race was in the media spotlight, the female candidate received a great deal of press attention, and it was a contest between a woman and a man to lead an avowedly right-wing political party. The leadership contest was on the media's radar but it became big news after a surprise Calgary by-election win by outgoing Wildrose Alliance leader Paul Hinman on September 14, 2009, just weeks before the leadership vote. "Wildrose basks in limelight after by-election victory" declared the *Calgary Herald* (D'Aliesio, 2009c), and the *Edmonton Journal* opined that the party was "blossoming into [a] big provincial contender" (Audette, 2009). From this point on, the press positioned Wildrose as the party that could "knock out" the provincial Tories, which had

been in government since 1971 (Hanon, 2009). Despite its commanding victory in the 2008 provincial election, the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta was judged as floundering under the leadership of Ed Stelmach. Media commentators cited the government's approach to oil and gas royalties, and its willingness to tolerate deficit financing in the wake of the economic downturn, for a slump in public support for the Conservatives (e.g. Gunter, 2009). Burgeoning membership sales for the Wildrose Alliance prompted media speculation that Conservative party members would caution the premier about the threat posed by the upstart new party by refusing to give him the requisite 70 per cent support at the party's mandatory November 7, 2009 leadership review (Diotte, 2009).² In short, the Wildrose leadership race had a high profile because of its implications for the Stelmach government. Indeed, as the *Calgary Herald* put it: "Ed has been warned" (*Calgary Herald*, 2009a). But the warning came with a caveat: the only way the party could become a "game-changer" was if Danielle Smith was selected as the party's new leader. A *Calgary Herald* columnist wrote: "Smith may be Stelmach's big nightmare" (Taube, 2009).

That the media focused considerable attention on Smith's candidacy, positioning her as the only candidate who could pose a threat to the governing Conservatives, is particularly intriguing. Women are not typically cast as front-runners or described as having the right stuff to vanquish a government. Indeed, because women have tended to lead unsuccessful political parties, they have an unfortunate reputation as "incurable losers" (Bashevkin, 2009: 11). But, as we will demonstrate, Smith was clearly marked by the press as a winner. When she secured the leadership, the *Calgary Herald* declared, "Alberta politics just got exciting" (*Calgary Herald*, 2009b). In other words, the Alberta media's reaction to a woman heading the party seen to have the best chance of unseating the government was one of delight, not discomfort. This reaction may reflect another key factor: ideology. At that time, Smith was a relatively rare breed—a female leader of a conservative party.³ The Wildrose Party is unabashedly right wing in its ideological orientation and policy stances. Left-wing parties have elected most of the female party leaders in Canada, with the New Democrats selecting women to lead the federal and many provincial wings of the party (O'Neill and Stewart, 2009: 743).⁴ Unlike

2 As it turned out, Ed Stelmach was not "warned" in this manner, as he received the support of more than 77 per cent of the party

3 After Smith's victory in October 2009, three more women were elected leader of a provincial conservative party: Olive Crane in PEI; Kathy Dunderdale in Newfoundland and Labrador; and Alison Redford in Alberta. Dunderdale and Redford are currently serving as premier of their respective provinces. Arguably Christy Clark, BC Liberal Party leader and premier, also leads a conservative party as the Liberals in that province are ideologically similar to Progressive Conservative parties in other jurisdictions.

4 The federal NDP has had two women leaders, Audrey McLaughlin and Alexa McDonough. At the provincial level, women have

her NDP counterparts, Smith, a self-proclaimed libertarian and fiscal conservative, does not need to worry about being branded a feminist or regarded as someone who will disrupt the gender order or the ideological status quo.⁵

Gendered Mediation of Female Politicians

Since most voting members of political parties don't have the opportunity to meet the leadership candidates, media coverage provides the primary lens through which such political events are interpreted and evaluated. As such, Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross have urged scholars to consider "the manner in which the mediated presentation of politics is gendered" (1996: 103). Mediation refers to the tendency of news coverage to go beyond merely reporting the "facts" by offering analysis and evaluations (Patterson, 1996: 97). Mediation is gendered when news selection, framing and evaluation reflect sex-based norms and assumptions by, for instance, highlighting a female candidate's personal life despite its irrelevance to the issue at hand (Ross, 2004). Little research has been done on gendered mediation of women seeking Canadian party leadership roles. At the provincial level, Everitt and Camp's (2009) examination of newspaper framing of Alison Brewer's victory in the 2005 New Brunswick NDP leadership contest found considerable attention paid to Brewer's personal identity as a lesbian and her public background as an abortion rights activist (Everitt and Camp, 2009). Belinda Stronach's bid for the Conservative party's leadership in 2004 was mediated by blatant gender stereotypes, with undue attention to Stronach's appearance and sexuality (Trimble and Everitt, 2010: 65). Clearly, gendered norms and assumptions can influence media coverage of party leadership contests featuring viable female candidates.

As the broader comparative literature on media coverage of female politicians indicates, gendered mediation is reflected in candidate news visibility, framing and evaluation. Women candidates are disadvantaged when they receive less media coverage than do men, thus are less *visible* during leadership or election contests. Earlier research found this to be the case in Canada and the United States (Carroll and Schreiber, 1997; Heldman, et al., 2005; Kahn 1992, 1994, 1996; Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991; Norris, 1997b; Sampert

and Trimble, 2003). More recent studies reveal that female leadership candidates garner as much if not more attention in newspaper articles than equivalent male candidates due to their enduring news value as "novelties" or, in some cases, their likelihood of winning (Bystrom et al., 2001; Bystrom et al., 2004; Lawrence and Rose, 2010; Trimble, 2007). Trimble's (2007) analysis of representations of male and female candidates in *Globe and Mail* news coverage of three Conservative Party of Canada leadership races, held in 1976, 1993 and 2004, found that the news prominence of female candidates is influenced to some degree by their distinctiveness as women in a "man's game," but visibility is also shaped by factors other than candidate sex, such as the standing of the party and the competitiveness of the contest (Trimble, 2007: 990). For instance, Kim Campbell was highly visible in national newspaper coverage of the 1993 Progressive Conservative Party of Canada leadership competition, reflecting her front-runner status (Trimble, 2007: 980). Similarly, the amount of attention Hillary Clinton received in print and TV news reports during the 2008 United States Democratic presidential nomination contest equalled or exceeded that of her male rivals (Lawrence and Rose, 2010: 157).

The literature also provides evidence of gendered news *framing*. Several studies have found that media framing of women politicians draws attention to stereotypical feminine qualities by emphasizing their sex, sexuality, appearance and domestic roles (Carroll and Schreiber, 1997; Everitt and Camp, 2009; Heldman et al., 2005; Jenkins, 1999; Mandziuk, 2008; McGregor, 1996; Robinson and Saint-Jean, 1991; Ross, 2002; Van Acker, 1999). For instance, Stronach's quest for the Conservative Party of Canada's leadership in 2004 featured as much attention to her hair, wardrobe and sex life as to her public persona and political ideas (Trimble and Everitt, 2010: 59-60). However, Stronach's case appears to be anomalous. Studies of media coverage of Canadian and New Zealand prime ministers and U.S. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton during their election campaigns found no more attention to these women's looks and family lives than to the physical appearance and families of their male competitors (Trimble et al., 2010; Lawrence and Rose, 2010; Trimble and Treiberg, 2010).

It is likely that the privatizing tropes of family lives, hairdos and wardrobes are incongruent with the dominant news frame for political competitions—the *game frame*—which emphasizes the horse race and strategic (thus public) aspects of the campaign (Semetko and Boomgaarden, 2007; Trimble and Sampert, 2004). Women who stand a good chance of winning elections are discursively positioned "in the game," and thus are as likely or more likely than their male competitors to be described with stereotypically masculine game language that evokes boxing matches and battlefields. But according to Gidengil and Everitt's gendered mediation thesis, developed from their research on television news coverage of party leaders' debates during the 1993, 1997 and 2000 Canadian national elections, positioning women leaders as "one of the boys" does not obviate gendered framing

led the party in British Columbia (Carole James), Alberta (Pam Barrett), New Brunswick (Alison Brewer) and Nova Scotia (Alexa McDonough). Three of the nine women presently serving as leader of a provincial party are NDP leaders: Ontario's Andrea Horwath, Newfoundland's Lorraine Michael and Yukon's Elizabeth Hanson.

5 Here it is important to note the disjuncture between the media consensus about Alberta's ideological status quo, as articulated by newspaper coverage of the Wildrose Alliance leadership contest, and recent opinion research. The latter shows Albertans are significantly more ideologically diverse than Alberta media representations lead readers to assume (Gazso and Krahn, 2008; Harrison, Johnston and Krahn, 2005; Stewart and Sayers, 2010).

(Everitt and Gidengil, 2003; Gidengil and Everitt, 1999, 2000, 2003a, 2003b). News about politics usually adopts a narrative marked by gladiatorial language and imagery, and this narrative may be deployed in a sex-differentiated fashion, for instance by positioning women as disproportionately combative and aggressive. Thus, even in the absence of overtly sexist or stereotypically feminine framing of women politicians, gender biases remain and are in fact “embedded in the conventional language of political news” (Gidengil and Everitt, 2003a: 560).

As an outcome of the game narrative and other conventional news routines, women politicians often face harsher *evaluations* of their viability and leadership competency than their male counterparts, thus undermining their political legitimacy (Falk, 2008; Kahn, 1992, 1994; Everitt and Gidengil, 2003; Gidengil and Everitt, 1999, 2000, 2003a; Heldman et al., 2005; McGregor, 1996; Robinson and Saint-Jean, 1991; Valenzuela and Correa, 2009). Gendered appraisals tend to regard women’s desire for political power as unseemly, unfeminine and even as illegitimate. For instance, by focusing on Nova Scotia NDP leadership candidate Alison Brewer’s sexual orientation and positioning her as a radical feminist, the New Brunswick media “pushed her toward the political margins” (Everitt and Camp, 2009: 128, 140). Belinda Stronach was treated to overtly hostile reportage in national newspapers, described as “little more than a cardboard cut-out fronting the ambitions of her backroom campaigners,” and deemed “unqualified” for the post of Conservative party leader (Trimble and Everitt, 2010: 66). During the 1993 Canadian national election, newly elected Conservative leader Kim Campbell’s speaking ability was significantly more likely to be scrutinized than was Liberal leader Jean Chrétien’s, and while Chrétien received largely positive assessments, reporters were hyper-critical of Campbell’s performances, even going so far as to say the Conservative campaign self-destructed in large part due to her “reckless” approach to public speech (Trimble et al., 2010). Similarly, Hillary Clinton attracted a great deal of negative coverage during her bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, and online reporting was replete with sexist and damaging narratives of Clinton as a power-hungry emasculator (Lawrence and Rose, 2010).

Our study determines whether gendered mediation was evident in Alberta newspaper coverage of the Wildrose Alliance leadership contest. We expected to find that Danielle Smith’s sex did not influence her news visibility during the leadership competition, as she was the acknowledged front-runner. While we anticipated that news coverage of this political competition would apply the game frame to both Smith and Dyrholm, we felt Smith’s sex/gendered persona had sufficient news value to be discussed more frequently than was the case for her male competitor. After all, it is unusual for a woman to seek the leadership of a blatantly conservative party. Because of her front-runner status, we expected the newspaper reportage to pay greater attention to Smith’s skills and performances than to those of her male competitor. Finally, because the Wildrose Alliance featured a numerically strong socially conservative faction (Kohler, 2009), and because Smith described herself as a fiscal but

not a social conservative, we thought resistance from this faction to a female leadership candidate might be expressed in the form of gendered evaluations.

Methodology

To analyze Alberta newspaper coverage of the Wildrose leadership contest, we gathered all stories, columns and editorials on the campaign printed in eight of Alberta’s nine daily newspapers⁶ between June 7, 2009, when Smith and Dyrholm announced their candidacies, and October 25, 2009, a week after the leadership convention. Since the purpose of the study is to assess news mediation of the contest and the candidates, items clearly not written by journalists—such as letters to the editor and candidate-penned articles—were excluded from the analysis. Duplicate stories were eliminated as well. The population of news items was further narrowed to include only those articles mentioning either Smith or Dyrholm, thus excluding several that discussed only the Wildrose Alliance. The final sample contains a total of 106 stories. Much of the attention to the leadership competition was in southern Alberta papers, with the *Calgary Herald* alone producing 26 per cent of the sample. The two Calgary papers, the *Herald* and the *Sun*, published 45 stories (43 per cent of the total). Large- and medium-circulation papers devoted more space to the Wildrose story, with the large-circulation dailies (*Calgary Herald* and *Edmonton Journal*) publishing 41 per cent of the stories, the medium-circulation dailies (*Calgary* and *Edmonton Sun*) contributing 34 per cent, and the small-circulation dailies (*Red Deer Advocate*, *Lethbridge Herald*, *Grand Prairie Daily Herald-Tribune* and *Medicine Hat News*) producing 25 per cent of the sample.

Stories were retrieved from a number of archival formats to preserve their layout, allowing for an analysis of photographs and political cartoons that appeared with the leadership coverage. Electronic versions of the two *Sun* newspapers were obtained through their online newspaper subscription service while articles in the *Journal* and *Calgary Herald* were downloaded from the Factiva database and photocopied from microfilm. Stories in the other four newspapers were gathered using microfilm at the Alberta Legislature Library.

The 106 news stories in the study were analyzed with both content and discourse analysis techniques. We employed a detailed coding system, which consists of a set of instructions on how to systematically observe and record content from a text,⁷ to quantify various aspects of candidate news visibility, framing and evaluation. A pre-test conducted

6 The ninth daily newspaper, the *Fort McMurray Today* of the Sun Media newspaper chain, did not produce any original stories on the Wildrose leadership campaign. Instead, it opted to print condensed versions of stories printed in other newspapers in the Sun Media chain.

7 The coding framework is available from the authors upon request. The authors conducted all coding for this study.

on 16 stories, two from each newspaper, resulted in revisions to the coding instrument. The two authors then performed an intercoder reliability test on 20 per cent of the overall sample, which confirmed a high level of agreement.⁸ Any difficulties in the coding instrument were discussed and resolved between the two authors before the remaining stories were coded. The content analysis was supplemented by a discourse analysis of all references to each candidate's personal characteristics (sex, age, marriage, children, appearance and sexual persona), public background (education, career background and political histories), ideological stances and leadership skills.⁹ While the quantitative analysis was useful for comparing the visibility and framing of the candidates, the discourse analysis allowed us to determine whether the descriptions, frames and evaluations differed in quantity, tone and meaning for the female and male candidates.

Findings

Candidate Visibility

Called the “media darling of the race” by the *Edmonton Journal* (Audette, 2009), Danielle Smith was deemed the “highest profile candidate” (Clancy, 2009) and the “perceived front-runner” (Bennett, 2009a). Smith was cited or tacitly acknowledged as the leader of the race in 10 of the 64 stories published before the vote, and one author even referred to the Smith “coronation” (D’Aliesio, 2009b). She won the contest handily, with 6,295 votes to Mark Dyrholm’s 1,905 (D’Aliesio, 2009c), so it is not surprising that Smith had a stronger presence and profile than Dyrholm in the stories published between June 7, when the leadership candidates declared their intentions, and voting day, October 17. That Smith’s win was top news is illustrated by the fact that fully 40 per cent of the stories about the leadership contest were printed in the week *after* she was elected leader. Moreover, Smith’s victory was announced on the front page by all eight newspapers.¹⁰

8 To determine the level of agreement between coders we used Cohen’s kappa for nominal data (Cohen, 1960; Perreault Jr. and Leigh, 1989) and Pearson’s correlation coefficient for interval data (Riffe et al., 2005). The kappa ranged from 0.751 to 1.000, and the Pearson’s *r* ranged from 0.980 to 1.000. These strong scores indicate that different coders using the same instrument would generally arrive at the same raw data (Landis and Koch, 1977).

9 We took an inventory of exactly what was said, who said it (reporter, columnist, editorial writer, pundit, party member, etc.), and where it was located in the text (e.g. headline, lead paragraph, last paragraph).

10 The Sun newspapers are tabloids in format and do not place the text of news stories on the front page. Rather they signal the importance of stories with front-page photos and ‘throws’ to stories embedded in the paper. The Sun papers therefore presented the Wildrose Alliance leadership result as a large photograph of Smith on the front page plus a small amount of text indicating

Smith was more visible than Dyrholm in the coverage published before the vote on all but one measure. Both Smith and Dyrholm appeared in 10 large photographs that accompanied pre-vote news stories. However, Smith enjoyed nine mugshots¹¹ while Dyrholm was shown in six. Notably, an *Edmonton Journal* story featured a mugshot of Smith alongside one of former Alberta premier Peter Lougheed, to whom she was likened, flatteringly, in the article (Firby, 2009a). Smith also appeared in more stories and was named in all but one (98%), while Dyrholm was named in just over three-quarters (78%) of the stories about the leadership contest. Smith’s name appeared more often as well, mentioned an average of 4.2 times per story in the stories which included her; for Dyrholm it was 3.2 times per story which included discussion of his candidacy. While neither candidate’s name was written into headlines very often prior to the convention, Smith’s name appeared in three headlines to Dyrholm’s lone mention. We also measured the extent to which the candidates were allowed to speak for themselves by counting the number of words quoted for each candidate in each story. Smith had an average of 31.3 words quoted in the stories that included her; for Dyrholm it was 23.7 words per story.

In sum, while Smith and Dyrholm appeared in the same number of photographs, Smith appeared in more mugshots and stories than her competitor, and her name and directly quoted ideas were given a higher profile. These data provide evidence that Smith was the tacitly acknowledged front-runner, and perhaps also reflect the fact that, due to her background as a former journalist, she was more experienced with, and more familiar to, the Alberta press corps than was Dyrholm (see. for instance, Taube, 2009; Hannaford, 2009a; Firby, 2009a; McCuaig and Gousseau, 2009).

Framing

Despite her high profile during the leadership contest, Danielle Smith was not initially on the media’s radar—nor was any woman, for that matter. Paul Hinman’s decision to step down from the Wildrose Alliance party leadership prompted media speculation about likely replacements and the names mentioned were invariably those of men (Simons, 2009). *Calgary Herald* columnist Don Braid noted that while Hinman and other party notables had “a champion in mind,” they refused to “name him or (*most unlikely*) her” (Braid, 2009a; emphasis ours). Pundits clearly did not think the party movers and shakers would back a woman. We were therefore surprised to find that the novelty of Smith’s sex was not highlighted in the coverage; indeed it was barely mentioned. Smith was not framed as a woman candidate. With a few exceptions, the media focus was on her public persona and political ideology.

the topic of the stories and the location of the coverage in the newspaper.

11 A mugshot only features the subject’s head and shoulders and is typically no more than one column wide.

Table 1 shows the results on all measures of personalization—the sorts of gendered references that emphasize a female candidate’s sex, bodily persona and private life—for the entire time period under study, including the post-convention coverage. Our study found the family lives of the two candidates were not on view, with only two stories mentioning their spouses and children. The data indicate quantitative differences in the treatment of the male and female candidates on four of the six measures—sex, sexualization, age and appearance—but the qualitative findings show that there was, in fact, little by way of gendered mediation in these references. We examine each of these measures in turn.

Table 1: Personalization Measures

	Mentioned in Story N (%)*					
	Sex	Age	Appearance	Marital Status	Children	Sexualized
Danielle Smith	3 (3%)	26 (25%)	16 (15%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)
Mark Dyrholm	0 (0%)	12 (18%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	2 (3%)	0 (0%)

*percentages calculated based on the total number of stories that included the candidate.

While Dyrholm’s sex was never overtly labelled, Smith’s sex was discussed in three stories. However, all were published *after* she was elected leader. Before the vote, neither reporters nor columnists drew explicit attention to the fact that a woman was competing to lead Alberta’s newest right-wing party. After Smith won the contest, *Calgary Herald* opinion writer Don Braid applauded the choice of a “young, fresh female leader,” and he suggested young Alberta women “might find her appealing” (Braid, 2009c). A *Red Deer Herald* article quoted a Smith supporter: “I think it will make a big difference that we have a female as a party leader. That might swing a lot of people towards us” (Tester, 2009). Finally, a *Calgary Sun* columnist whose style is best described as tongue-in-cheek lumped Smith in with other right-wing women who “rock” (Robinson, 2009b). This same columnist included Smith with women he labelled “right-wing hotties,” the only evidence of sexualization we found in the sample (Robinson, 2009a). In short, Smith’s sex was cited as a likely benefit to the party’s electoral prospects. Similarly, Smith’s age was noted in a slightly higher percentage of stories than was Dyrholm’s, but for both candidates it was simply presented as a fact (e.g., “Dyrholm, 38” and “38-year-old Smith”). Because Smith and Dyrholm are the same age, their relative youth was not situated as a disadvantage, or advantage, to either candidate.

The lone variable that strongly suggests gendered mediation is attention to appearance. Dyrholm’s looks were never mentioned while for Smith, 16 stories (15%) discussed her appearance (see Table 1). This is an indication of lingering gender stereotypes. Smith was deemed “attractive” by a couple of columnists (Gunter, 2009; Diotte, 2009) and called “glamorous” by a few others (Braid, 2009c; Firby, 2009b). These are trivializing tropes, but when read in context it is clear these and other descriptors of Smith’s appearance were not intended to challenge her legitimacy as a leadership contender. Representations of Smith’s looks did not focus on her bodily persona and wardrobe, but rather

were part of an overall evaluation of her leadership skills. Our discourse analysis revealed that Smith was consistently described as “photogenic” (e.g., *Calgary Herald*, 2009b; Thompson, 2009), “telegenic” (e.g., Bennett, 2009a; McCuaig and Gousseau, 2009) and “camera-friendly” (Fekete, 2009b), descriptors which, in our view, are also likely to be applied to male politicians. Moreover, discussions of Smith’s telegenic look were invariably situated within a larger evaluation of her media skills (e.g., “telegenic former journalist and TV host,” McCuaig and Gousseau, 2009) and her ability to successfully lead the party. For example, “she would instantly *look* and sound better than most government spokesmen and MLAs” (Gunter, 2009; italics added); or “she *looks* like a leader ... she carries that stance, that confidence and she’s going to be a force to be reckoned with” (Gousseau, 2009a). A Wildrose Alliance member was quoted as saying, “Danielle has such an unfair advantage—look at her. What Tory could beat her?” (Braid, 2009c). Representations of Smith’s photogeneity were part and parcel of highly laudatory evaluations of her leadership skills more generally, as we discuss in the next section.

Further evidence that Smith was neither marginalized nor privatized by the newspaper coverage is provided by our analysis of game framing of the leadership candidates. Studies of competitive female politicians also show that they tend to be placed firmly within the game frame, and this was certainly the case for Smith. Game metaphors appeared in 95 per cent of the stories published before the vote, and the classic game language of the “race” or “battle” was frequently used to describe the candidates. Smith was marginally more likely than Dyrholm to be described with game metaphors such as “took aim” or “hammered away” before the vote was taken. A game metaphor was applied to Smith in 65 per cent of the stories published before her victory, while for Dyrholm it was 61 per cent. Upon winning the leadership, Smith deployed aggressive game language herself, with an oft-quoted warning to the premier: “Ed Stelmach, you haven’t even begun to imagine what’s about to hit you” (e.g. Braid, 2009c; this statement was quoted in seven stories).

Table 2: References to Candidates’ Public Personas

	Mentioned in Story N (%)*					
	Public background		Ideology		Leadership skills	
	Before vote	After vote	Before vote	After vote	Before vote	After vote
Danielle Smith	34 (54%)	17 (41%)	23 (37%)	23 (55%)	18 (29%)	22 (52%)
Mark Dyrholm	26 (51%)	5 (31%)	14 (28%)	9 (57%)	3 (6%)	2 (13%)

*percentages are calculated based on the number of stories mentioning the candidate.

Table 2 shows that the focus was firmly directed at the candidates’ public personas and performances within the campaign. “Public background” was measured as any reference to the candidate’s education, political history and career. Smith’s public background was slightly more likely than Dyrholm’s to be referenced in the coverage of the leadership contest in the lead-up to the vote. It is possible that this was because Smith had a more varied career trajectory than did Dyrholm, who was simply described as a “Calgary chiropractor.” Smith’s ideological positions were also more likely than Dyrholm’s to be noted by the press in the period prior to the convention. The most striking difference in the treatment of

the two candidates was the media's willingness to describe and discuss Smith's leadership qualities. Before the vote, Smith's leadership attributes were almost five times more likely to be itemized than were Dyrholm's. In short, the media spotlight was on the public performances and skills of the candidates, with a slightly higher degree of attention to Smith's public background, and significantly more focus on her ideology and leadership skills, prior to the vote.

Mediation and Evaluation

Even with the media's focus on the skills and behaviours of the candidates, we expected more, and more gendered, evaluations of Smith for two reasons. First, because women are atypical candidates for political leadership positions they may attract more inspection than their male competitors. Second, few women seek or win the leadership of right-wing parties, perhaps because these parties tend to reflect socially conservative perspectives on gender roles. As a result, a woman in the race for the top job of a conservative party is likely to have her ideological credentials and her campaign performance scrutinized by pundits. Certainly there was plenty of room for mediation in newspaper coverage of the Wildrose leadership contest, as 40 per cent of the reportage was classified as opinion. Editorials and opinion columns by staff writers and guest columnists are expected to interpret and judge the competition and its competitors.

As anticipated, Smith attracted much more mediation and evaluation than her male competitor. Smith's ideology and leadership skills were more likely than Dyrholm's to be evaluated by the press (see Table 2, above). Most of the stories were descriptive, but as indicated by Table 3, there were considerably more evaluative stories about Smith than about Dyrholm.¹² This level of assessment is to be expected after the contest is over, thus it is significant that Smith attracted three times as many evaluative stories as Dyrholm *before* the vote. We believe this high level of appraisal reflected Smith's standing in the competition. Dyrholm's personal viability in the leadership campaign was never assessed in the coverage, whereas Smith was marked as the front-runner and likely victor. As a result, the possible impact of Smith's leadership on the Wildrose Alliance's electoral fortunes was three times more likely than Dyrholm's to be discussed (see Table 3). In our view, reporters turned their attention to the candidate they thought had the strongest chance of winning the leadership and, perhaps more importantly, the next provincial election.

Table 3: Presence of Candidate Evaluations N (%)*

	Story is predominantly evaluative		Personal viability (ability to win the contest) assessed	Impact on party viability assessed	
	Before vote	After vote	Before vote	Before vote	After vote
Danielle Smith	15 (24%)	22 (52%)	10 (16%)	19 (30%)	27 (64%)
Mark Dyrholm	4 (8%)	3 (19%)	0 (0%)	5 (10%)	5 (33%)

*percentages are calculated based on the total number of stories that included the candidate.

To be evaluated positively as the potential leader of a fledgling right-wing party in Alberta, a candidate must boast a consistent conservative pedigree and (as a *Maclean's* article put it) the capacity to "transform what's been a ragtag party living at the margins to a credible alternative to the governing Tories" (Kohler, 2009). Our discourse analysis confirms that Smith's candidacy, and eventual victory, were seen as key to the "Wildrose wildfire" allegedly sweeping the province (Edmonton Journal, 2009a; Hannaford, 2009a). According to media commentators, the new leader of the Wildrose Alliance needed to be fiscally conservative and capable of representing (or at the very least placating) the socially conservative factions of the party. While Dyrholm was firmly positioned as a social conservative, Smith was cast as more moderate, typically described as economically conservative and socially liberal (e.g., Taube, 2009). Dyrholm's ideological stance was regarded as a strike against him (Gousseau, 2009b). As one columnist put it, "going hard on abortion, gays and guns doesn't get conservatives into power," so if it elects Dyrholm as leader, the party "will never make government" (Hannaford, 2009b). Another opined, "if Smith loses, the party is doomed" (Braid, 2009b). In contrast, columnists and academics suggested Smith was more likely to build a "big-tent" political party that would attract voters away from the ruling Progressive Conservatives (Fekete, 2009a; Hanon, 2009; Gousseau, 2009b). For instance, "commentators and political scientists labelled Smith a big-tent moderate who could appeal to a wider range of conservative voters and capitalize on the [by-election] victory in Calgary-Glenmore" (Bennett, 2009b). A guest writer for the *Calgary Sun* said "a Smith leadership would aim to shift the Wildrose Alliance brand into the Alberta political mainstream, with a balance of fiscal conservatism and social libertarianism" (Firby, 2009b).

Observers were similarly clear, and complimentary, in their assessments of Smith's leadership abilities. Prior to the vote, only three articles contained any reference to Dyrholm's leadership skills while 18 stories contained assessments of Smith's leadership skills, many of them fulsome. For instance, an *Edmonton Journal* columnist asserted: "For youth, energy and looks, Smith is a fitting heir to the Lougheed mantle of leadership ... she is quick-witted, highly polished in her delivery and well-rehearsed after years of public policy debate" (Firby, 2009a). Her media skills were praised, with descriptors such as "articulate," "telegenic," "media-savvy," "well-spoken" and "talented" (Thompson, 2009; Bennett, 2009c; Diotte, 2009; D'Aliesio, 2009c; Leong, 2009), and she was evaluated as "more comfortable in front of a camera or microphone than most politicians" (Gunter, 2009). Several columnists lauded Smith's speaking

12 We employed Gidengil and Everitt's (2000) categories, distinguishing between: *descriptive* stories, which are primarily factual; *analytical* stories, which explain events and behaviours; and *evaluative* stories, which evaluate actors and assess possible outcomes.

abilities. For instance, one commended her “eloquence,” saying “she’s an enthusiastic speaker who can convince and inspire an audience” (Braid, 2009c). Consistently described as “smart” (Bell, 2009; Robinson, 2009a), “intelligent” (Giles, 2009; Taube, 2009), with a “mind like a steel trap” (Hannaford, 2009b), Smith was said to have a strong grasp of policy issues (D’Aliesio, 2009c). A *Calgary Herald* editorial called her a “whiz at public policy” (*Calgary Herald*, 2009b). While some commentators described Smith as “experienced” (Gousseau, 2009b; Taube, 2009), the lone negative assessment suggested otherwise: “Smith’s only semi-political experience was as an elected Calgary public school board trustee during a period of infighting that led the province to fire the entire board” (D’Aliesio, 2009b). Overall, the tone and trend of the evaluations of Smith are nicely summarized by this quotation: “Smith, with her smooth, polished, clear and to the point style, showed off her conservative pedigree while identifying with many in the crowd who shared her status as a fallen Tory” (McCuaig, 2009).

Summary

To sum up our findings, not only was Danielle Smith more visible and prominent in the Alberta newspaper coverage of the Wildrose Alliance leadership contest than her male competitor, Mark Dyrholm, game framing positioned her as the likely winner of the contest and the most likely candidate to challenge the governing Conservative party in the next election. Smith did not have to endure a large number of personalizing or feminizing references to her family, sex life or wardrobe, though a few commentators referred to Smith as “attractive” and “glamorous.” Overall, the focus was on Smith’s public persona and her ideological and communicative skills for the job of party leader. Smith was significantly more likely than Dyrholm to be evaluated by the coverage, and with the exception of one mildly negative comment about her role as a Calgary school board trustee, these evaluations were laudatory. Smith was commended for her policy expertise, intelligence, speaking style and particularly for her ability to communicate with and through the news media. She was, as one reporter put it, the “media darling” of the leadership competition and clearly benefited from her longstanding relationships with the Alberta press corps.¹³

Discussion and Conclusions

According to the literature on media coverage of female politicians, assessments of their leadership skills and political performances tend to reflect sex-based assumptions about gender roles and the essential qualities for political leadership. Our analysis of the references to Smith’s personal and public persona, her ideology and leadership skills, and

evaluations of her likely impact on the party’s political fortunes, shows that this was not the case with respect to newspaper coverage of the Wildrose Alliance leadership contest. Smith received plenty of attention from newspaper coverage and she was framed as firmly “in the game,” indeed as likely to win the leadership and perhaps even the next provincial election. Party members, pundits and columnists alike heaped praise on Smith, citing her strong media skills, eloquence, ideological clarity and grasp of policy issues as key to the party’s capacity to build momentum. Only one writer tied Smith’s political success to her sex, and his evaluation was admiring: “A new era might have begun Sunday with the Wildrose Alliance’s choice of a young, fresh female leader who could connect remarkably well with voters ... with her mix of eloquence, style and intellect, she could become a political rock star” (Braid, 2009c). In short, Smith was almost unanimously described as having the right stuff for both the party leadership role and a serious bid for Alberta’s top political job as premier of the province. Moreover, newspaper coverage of the Wildrose Alliance leadership contest did not evidence sexism or gender stereotypes.¹⁴ With the exception of a few references to her “glamour” and good looks, representations of Smith did not personalize or privatize her political persona. This finding, plus the observation that Smith’s leadership skills were taken seriously, suggest gender balance in contemporary media coverage of women seeking party leadership roles. However, we do not think the findings from this particular case study can be extrapolated to conclude that mediation of party leadership is somehow un-gendered. Two contextual factors shaped gendered mediation of Danielle Smith.

That Smith campaigned as a libertarian and a fiscal conservative in her quest to secure the leadership of a right-wing political party was clearly to her advantage in a province where economic conservatism is assumed to constitute the dominant ideology. Pundits (and supporters within the Wildrose Party itself) strategically deployed Smith’s gender as a way of presenting a progressive image of the party to Alberta voters, while reassuring themselves that her gender will not result in progressive policies. Female politicians are often stereotyped as more left leaning than male politicians, thus disadvantaging women seeking party or government leadership positions (Murray, 2010: 9), especially when the female candidate is linked to the women’s movement or associated with feminist positions on controversial policy issues. For example, Progressive Conservative Justice Minister Kim Campbell’s handling of controversial gun control, sexual assault and abortion legislation prompted critics on the right to accuse her of being a feminist sympathizer (Bashevkin, 2009: 101). In contrast, Smith was assessed as

13 Smith had worked as a columnist for the *Calgary Herald* before serving as a television and radio program host, so she had experience with three branches of the Alberta media.

14 Lawrence and Rose (2010: 13) define *sexist* media treatment of politicians as representations that over-value male candidates and under-value female candidates *because of* their sex. They argue that much media coverage is not sexist, *per se*, but reflects “a reification of gender stereotypes which attribute to men and women different tendencies, characteristics, and areas of competence.”

untainted by feminism and thus as unlikely to cause gender trouble. For instance, Smith's stance on abortion was deemed acceptable to party members because, although she supports a woman's right to choose, Smith opposes state provision of abortion services on libertarian grounds (Audette, 2009). As our discourse analysis demonstrated, Smith's ideological position was heralded for its ability to situate Wildrose firmly within the (alleged) Alberta "mainstream." In our view, it is likely that a similarly competitive woman candidate for a centrist or left-leaning Alberta political party would face much harsher scrutiny of her ideological positions and possible links to the women's movement. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that any other party leadership candidate, male or female, could attract such consistently adulatory coverage.

Perhaps Smith attracted such universally positive reportage because of the news value of her candidacy, which was in turn linked to her sex. The media narrative about the leadership contest was largely a cautionary tale directed at Ed Stelmach and the long-governing Progressive Conservatives. By describing Smith as the Wildrose "wild card" who could give the Tories "a run for their money in the next election" (Gunter, 2009), the media posed the enticing possibility that a woman-led party might bring the 49-year Conservative Party reign to an end. According to *Maclean's* magazine, "Today, with the 38-year-old Smith as leader, [the Wildrose Alliance] sits atop the polls as the governing Progressive Conservatives come unglued" (Cosh, 2010). Smith's gender added considerable novelty to this proposition. As the *Globe and Mail* observed, the party's "message is not being delivered by *some old boy* in a 10-gallon hat but, instead, by a *media-savvy woman*, with Alberta roots. Danielle Smith is Mr. Stelmach's worst nightmare" (Mason, 2010; emphasis ours). In this context, we find it very interesting that the Wildrose Party's quest to take down the government was visually punctuated by editorial cartoons showing Smith as a defiant and fearless female version of David to Stelmach's Goliath (Edmonton Journal 2009b; Calgary Herald 2009c).¹⁵ In the 2012 Alberta election, Smith did not succeed in replicating the ending to that mythical tale, but that she stood a chance of toppling the Tory colossus surely enhanced the allure of the story.

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15 In the *Herald* cartoon, Smith, wielding a slingshot, is challenging Ed Stelmach, then Premier, who is protected by a tank and a big gun (representing his party's 72 seat majority). Smith is drawn wearing a skirt labeled "Wild Rose" and while this serves as a visual identifier, it also serves as a gender marker. Smith typically wears pantsuits for public appearances.

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