Gender and the presidential honeymoon:
An analysis of news coverage of three Chilean Presidents and its effects

by

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Abstract

Women are not only running for president in many countries —they are winning. Yet, little is know about how the news media portray the first months in office when the president is a woman. That is the focus of this case study, a content analysis of newspaper coverage of the honeymoon period of the new female president of Chile. The results suggest gender-biased news coverage of the president and her suitability to do the job.
Throughout history, it has been rare for women to head up a government. Consequently, there is little research concerning female incumbents. But in the last two years, women have become the head of government for the first time in Germany, Liberia, and Chile. In the US, Hillary Clinton officially announced her intention to run for the presidential election in 2008. Although other women have led major democracies before, these events have been especially marked in part because this kind of triumph is still rare. Research suggests that when women go beyond the usual boundaries of their political roles, they may meet with some resistance from the media and the public (Devere & Davies, 2006; Devitt, 2002; Robertson & Anderson, 2001; Scharrer, 2002). Feminist scholars also argue that female politicians have to endure a stereotypical portrayal by the media that reinforces the idea that women do not really belong in politics (see, for example, Byerly & Ross, 2006; Gallagher, 2001; Ross, 2004, 2002; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996; Sreberny & Van Zoonen, 2000; Thomas, 1997). Therefore, the honeymoon period, the first months of a government when “in- and out-partisans alike share good feelings” (Gronke & Brehm, 2002), might be different for a woman, and the press might have something to do with it.

As novelties, female politicians have to endure media focus on their personal traits rather than their handling of political matters. But when it comes to the head of a government, there has not been much opportunity for a comparison. Conversely, the mere fact of a “Madam President” can generate high expectations about this woman’s performance, imposing even more attention and possible criticism on her job (Clift & Brazaitis, 2000).

Therefore, Chile’s Michelle Bachelet’s venture in the presidential office provides an opportunity to address the president-media relationship with a new focus. A previous study revealed that the Chilean press did treat the candidate Bachelet differently than the male
presidential contenders (Valenzuela & Correa, 2006). The present case study addresses whether the differences continued once she was inaugurated and what is the impact of this coverage on her administration’s approval ratings.

Thus, with framing and agenda setting as frameworks, this content analysis examines differences in news coverage in Chile’s first female president, Michelle Bachelet, and two of her male predecessors, Eduardo Frei and Ricardo Lagos.

**The Chilean Case**

The Coalition of Parties for Democracy has ruled Chile since 1990, after a 17-year military dictatorship came to a peaceful end. This study considers the last three administrations.

Eduardo Frei took office on 1994. Son of a former President, and a member of the Christian Democrat Party, he currently is the president of the Senate.

Ricardo Lagos, a renowned social democrat politician for decades, won the 1999-2000 presidential election by a narrow margin in a runoff election, but left office with a historically high approval rating of 70%.

Michelle Bachelet, who became the 34th president of Chile, and the first female to hold this position in the country’s history, succeeded him on March 11, 2006. Almost an unknown in politics, she became popular while serving as Health Minister and Defense Minister under President Lagos. Unlike her predecessors, Bachelet did not have a visible political career before the 1973 military coup, nor was she especially involved in the journey that led to a return to democracy. She won the election in a runoff with 53.5% of the vote.

**Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

- **Gender and Politics.** The literature shows that women politicians are viewed differently than their male counterparts. Female candidates and officials are portrayed more dismissively
and receive less coverage than men (Kahn, 1994a, 1994b; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991; Niven & Zilbe, 2001; Norris, 1997). When they do receive attention, the focus is on “women’s issues” such as abortion and family leave (Huddy & Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b; Niven & Zilbe, 2001, Robertson & Anderson, 2001). News reports focus on personal traits of females, and are more likely to suggest that men are qualified and knowledgeable of the issues at hand (Davis, 1982; Devitt, 2002; Kahn, 1994a; Robertson & Anderson, 2001). Female politicians are also persistently trivialized (Byerly & Ross, 2006), open to a highly critical form of scrutiny, most of the time gender-specific (Norris, 1997; Ross, 2002), and casually undermined by the media (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Sreberny & Ross, 2000). Sometimes, they are regarded as just “too nice to get involved in the dirty business of big boy’s politics” (Ross, 2002, p. 40).

In addition, men are perceived as more skillful in areas like defense or economy — areas regarded as more important for higher levels of office than the typical areas of female strength, such as education or health care (Heldman, Carroll & Olson et al., 2005; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993a, 1993b). The qualities expected in a leader, such as assertiveness, ambition, and strength, are perceived as inappropriate for a woman (Devere & Davies, 2006). Studies also suggested that female managers receive unfair evaluations and that gendering of leadership roles operates to the disadvantage of both women and men (Eagly, Karau & Makhijani, 1995; Eagly, Makhijani & Klonsky, 1992; Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

Even if these differences did not exist in reality, gender would have an effect on the female’s performance in office: both allies and adversaries can perceive it as salient and change their own behavior towards that woman (Genovese & Thompson, 1993). As Heldman
et al. (2005) argued, perhaps there is no political position where gender stereotypes work more to women’s disadvantage than the highly masculinized office of the presidency.

In this scenario, the notion of “gendered mediation” (Gidengil & Everitt, 2003a; 2003b; 2000) helps to understand the problem. It suggests that “the way in which politics is reported . . . privileges the practice of politics as an essentially male pursuit” (2003b, p. 210). In this view, female politicians are regarded as novelties, whose behavior is subject to more evaluation and interpretation, and disproportionate media attention, because it opposes traditional feminine stereotypes. Moreover, even conventional political frames treat the male as normative (Gidengil & Everitt, 2000). The coverage women politicians receive, then, is not simply “sex-stereotypical or negative, [but] it is different from the manner in which male politicians are represented” (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996, p. 113).

Thus, the representations of woman in the media, and especially in the news, keep reinforcing boundaries in the access of woman to the public sphere: females are not supposed to become politicians (Ross, 2004, 2002; Sreberny & Ross, 2000; see also Norris, 1997). Women still face many of the same problems that were evident several decades ago, when scholars and activists first raised their critiques of women’s marginality and misrepresentation (Byerly & Ross, 2006, p. 37). In her studies of the relationships between women, politics, and media in three countries in different continents, Karen Ross concluded that women still are viewed as in “need to convince a traditional polity that they are competent as politicians despite their gender” (Ross, 2002, p. 43).

- **Women in Higher Office.** Breaking into politics is hard for women, but moving up the political ladder has shown to be even harder. Since 1960, when Sirimavo Bandaranaike of then Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) became the first female prime minister in the world, only fifty-
nine women have ever served as an elected president or prime minister, and presently, there are ten women as heads of state and/or government\(^1\) (Clift & Brazaitis, 2000; Hoogensen & Solheim, 2006).

Those women who made it to the top came from varied political systems, had different paths to power, and enjoyed long and short tenures (Genovese & Thompson, 1993). Such differences make it difficult to identify trends in media coverage, let alone their honeymoons. In many European countries, like Ireland or Iceland (both countries with a female president in the past), the presidential office is more ceremonial than executive, similar to the role of a constitutional monarchy. In countries with parliamentary systems, like the United Kingdom, the head of a political party takes office if the party wins in a national election (Lanoue & Headrick, 1994). It was said that Margaret Thatcher owed her election as prime minister more to the failure of the Labour government that to the appeal of her policies or her personality. She was constantly less popular than her own party (Clift & Brazaitis, 2000; Genovese, 1993).

But whatever conditions these few national female leaders experienced, one thing seems constant: they had to endure significant gender biases (Norris, 1997). For example, in Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto’s gender was a common explanation for her failures (Anderson, 1993). In New Zealand, the media used a “girlpower frame” to report the success of women in politics and its apparent downside: the emasculation of men (Fountaine, 2005). In addition, a study on media and female leaders worldwide found that the “woman politician” frame was commonly used as an all-inclusive description, regardless of these women’s differences, thus suggesting that the media view women through a sex-stereotyped lens (Norris, 1997).

- **Presidential Honeymoon.** Traditionally, research has suggested that a newly elected president enjoys a “honeymoon period” (Hughes, 1995; Norpoth, 1984; Johnson, 1983). The

\(^1\) This number excludes monarchs.
concept refers to the first months at the beginning of a new administration, when “a president can seemingly do no wrong in the eyes of the public” (Sigelman & Knight, 1983, p. 310). This occurs regardless of how closely the general election was contested (Headrick & Lanoue, 1991). For instance, Metzger (1999) determined that about 6 points of popularity of a just-inaugurated administration is explained solely by the honeymoon effect. And although researchers disagree on how long this period lasts —some say ten weeks, others prefer a reference to “the first 100 days” — empirical data showed that by the end of the fourth month of the term, the effect is over (Metzger, 1999).

The most popular explanation for the dissipation of the honeymoon is the Expectation/Disillusion Theory (Sigelman & Knight, 1983). It attributes the end of the honeymoon to the decline of public approval after unrealistically high expectations of presidential performance give way to more realistic assessments —even before the government starts failing (Niven, 2000). Thus, except for Eisenhower and Clinton, no American administration in the postwar era has enjoyed poll ratings consistently much higher that its general election vote (Crew & Weiher, 1996). The same has been reported in Germany (Anderson, 1995), Australia (McAllister, 2003), and the United Kingdom (Rallings & Thrasher, 2001).

Another approach asserts that the public support is most responsive to prominent outcomes in the domestic and international environment, mainly the economy (this is, prosperity) and foreign relations (i.e. peace). These are fixed expectations, imposed on all presidents regardless of party, ideology, or prior experience (Ostrom & Simon, 1989). Additionally, presidents are also judged on personal characteristics: competence, integrity, empathy, and leadership (Gronke & Brehm, 2002).
• **The Press and the Assessment of the President.** The relationship that a president establishes with the public is highly mediated by the press (Hughes, 1995). Morgan (1995) explained that the treatment of a president by the media affects his or her success. It also affects the public’s perception about the assertiveness of the president (Hughes, 1995).

During the honeymoon period, media coverage focuses on the president, his appointees, and the new administration’s plans. As a result, the president’s rhetoric is the only story (Li, 1999). When the honeymoon is over, the president’s message in all its parts is examined critically (Morgan, 1995).

Different studies (Kiousis, 1999; Valentino, Beckmann & Buhr, 2001) on coverage of the White House concluded that the press significantly predicts the president’s job approval and that the particular frames chosen by journalists influence how the audience attributes responsibility for societal problems.

• **Framing.** Scholars have analyzed how reporters use frames to highlight some bits of information about an item they cover, elevating its salience (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2003; Scheufele, 1999). Thus, the selection of information and the use of frames is a fundamental part of news reporting practices (Entman 1993; Gamson, 1989; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Framing has several operational definitions and lacks a methodological consistency, although in general it is related to what media make of a story. Entman (1993), for example, defined framing as selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a text to promote a particular definition, interpretation, evaluation or solution. According to Reese (2003), frames are “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (p. 11, italics in original). In a more cognitive approach, Scheufele (2000) argued that frames may
affect how audiences think about issues by invoking interpretive schemas that influence the interpretation of information.

Thus, frames are interpretive packages the media use to reduce the complexity of issues for their audience (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002). They provide a way to understand messages and issues (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Maher, 2003).

Gendered mediation and sex-stereotypes may be included into these broader principles that audience members come to perceive as reality (Scharrer, 2002; see also Norris, 1997).

- **Agenda-setting effects.** A theory developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the agenda-setting function of mass media refers to the ability of the news media to focus public attention on a few key objects. Media coverage gives salience cues to the public showing them which issues are important. The public receives these cues and believes that the issues receiving extensive coverage are more important than those issues receiving little coverage.

  The salience of attributes on the media agenda may influence the salience of those attributes on the public agenda. This has been called the “second level” of agenda setting, which mainly affects comprehension (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; McCombs, López-Escobar & Llamas, 2000). In this line of research, the focus is in examining the tone of news coverage, rather than simply the amount and placement of coverage (Hester & Gibson, 2003).

  In political communication, for example, researchers proved that people linked attributes to political figures in accordance to media coverage (Golan & Wanta, 2001; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Studies also found that evaluations of the president’s performance in office are related to the salient issues of the moment (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Iyengar & Simon, 1997). Thus, by highlighting negative issues such as errors, conflicts, or failed projects, media
coverage of the presidential performance can make the public more critical regarding the president’s performance (Kim et al., 2002; Goidel & Langley, 1995).

**Hypotheses**

In order to examine whether the gender of the president affects press coverage during the honeymoon period of a new administration, and to determine if these differences—if any—have an impact on public evaluations, the following hypotheses are tested:

H1: The honeymoon period of Chile’s president, Michelle Bachelet, is shorter than that of the two previous administrations, as shown in the amount of criticism published in the press.

H2: Newspaper coverage of Bachelet is different in tone from coverage of her (male) predecessors, due to a gendered mediation.

H3: Stories about Bachelet that focus on her administration are more likely to be negative than reports that focus on other topics.

H4: The more Bachelet is presented as a newcomer in political activities, the more likely the tone of the story will be negative.

H5: Newspaper coverage of Bachelet that focuses on her performance is more likely to be negative than similar reports about her predecessors.

H6: The more negative the tone of the news stories, the more negative the public evaluation of the president will be.

**Research Methods**

This study is based on the use of content analysis, a multipurpose research technique where the content is examined independently of who produced it, analyzing the meaning of the message and extracting inferences from it (Krippendorff, 1980; Poindexter & McCombs,
2000). Data from three newspapers were analyzed, and later compared with data provided by public opinion polls surveying the approval rating of the president in office.

Comparing political executives in a single system over time can help elucidate the relatively permanent features of the system. The arrival in office of a person whose background or career is sharply discontinuous with the immediate past creates a quasi-experimental situation (Genovese & Thompson, 1993). Thus, when a woman becomes president it clearly represents a significant departure from the past. This allows an analysis of the impact of gender in media coverage of the presidential office.

This study is aimed at testing six hypotheses about news coverage during the honeymoon period of three Chilean presidents, one female and two male, in the Chilean press. Because there is no consensus on the duration of such period, the analysis included the first 200 days (seven months) in office of current president Michelle Bachelet and two of her predecessors, Ricardo Lagos and Eduardo Frei.

The newspapers selected were El Mercurio, La Tercera and Las Últimas Noticias, national dailies with different audiences. Currently, they also have the largest circulations. El Mercurio is the elite newspaper of record, La Tercera is the upper middle-class newspaper, and Las Últimas Noticias is a popular tabloid, previously focused on reporting crime stories and now centered on celebrities and silly stories.

The sample was gathered based on the constructed week method, because it allows greater generalization over time than simple random samples or consecutive day samples. Acting “as a stratification for days of the week”, it also avoids the possibility of oversampling Saturdays or Sundays (Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993, p. 135).
Thus the analysis considered every piece that mentioned the name of the president in office (including features, interviews, editorials, letters to the editor, and picture captions) published in any of the three newspapers, starting on March 12 (the day following Inauguration Day) and then continuing every eighth day for the next seven months. Consequently, it consisted of four constructed weeks for each administration.

The articles from the selected dates were obtained using both La Tercera’s and El Mercurio’s internal databases. The latter includes all the articles published by Las Últimas Noticias, since both newspapers belong to the same publishing group. The search was conducted entering the last name of each president in the databases.

The final sample consisted of 1,679 items. Each one was coded for source and date of publication. The analysis also included coding of the government’s performance and mentions of gender, as well as a more qualitative approach to analyze the tone. Specifically, to test H1, about a shorter honeymoon for Bachelet, each item coded whether it mentioned the presidents’ performance, competence and overall evaluation of their jobs (positive, neutral or negative), and the basis and extension of these evaluations. To test H2, a gendered tone in coverage about Bachelet, variables such as the highlighting of the gender of the president, as well as gender-biased mentions of personal traits and background were coded. For H3, which posited a negative evaluation of Bachelet in office, the main subject of the story was coded into any of the following categories: presidency, cabinet, congress, Supreme Court, regional government, armed forces, political parties, economy and businesses, education, health, crime and corruption, environment, poverty, human rights, and infrastructure. Then, the focus of these subjects was classified as issue, personal, performance or competence. To test H4, about

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2 Eventually, these categories were grouped into eight groups: presidency, domestic policy, congress, Supreme Court, regional government, political parties, foreign policy and other.
Bachelet’s lack of experience, the highlighting of the background of the president was coded, as well as her expertise and experience in politics. All evaluation of the president in office was coded as positive, neutral or negative to test H5, which focused on the performance of the president. Finally, to test H6, about agenda-setting effects, the number of stories was used as a measure of the salience of each president’s issues and personal characteristics.

Besides the author, two other Chilean graduate students with experience in content analysis worked as coders. Preliminary inter-coder reliability, based on Holsti’s formula, ranged from .74 to .99. After fixing some conflicting instructions, inter-coder reliability ranged from .96 to .99, with a mean of .98.

The public opinion poll data considered for the study comes from the surveys conducted by the Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP), a private, non-partisan, academic entity that has been conducting comprehensive public opinion surveys for more than 25 years. Although CEP is regarded as the most serious and reliable pollster in Chile, its surveys are not conducted monthly, but every three or six months. In order to have a similar time frame for the poll of each administration, only one survey was analyzed for each president: the one conducted in December.

Once all the material was coded, all the data was processed and statistically analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). This software can be used to produce frequencies, cross-tabulations and other appropriate statistics, like chi-square and Cramer’s V (the statistical significance tests used in this study). The chi-square test is especially relevant to test H6. As explained by Golan and Wanta (2001), statistically significant chi-squares would suggest that media coverage differed from public perceptions. Non-significant chi-squares, in contrast, would demonstrate that media coverage was similar
to public perceptions, as is suggested by H6. Thus, Golan and Wanta argue, while chance cannot be ruled out as a cause of the results, non-significant differences would demonstrate at least the potential for the second-level of agenda setting.

**Results**

- **The honeymoon period.** H1 predicted a shorter honeymoon period for Bachelet in comparison to her male predecessors. According to Table 1, the results supported this hypothesis. During the first month in office, negative coverage represented only 6%, 4%, and 4% of the stories published on Frei, Lagos and Bachelet, respectively. During the third month Frei and Lagos received about the same percentage of negative coverage (16% and 17% respectively). But Bachelet’s negative coverage increased significantly: 25 percent of the stories were negative. Compared to the other two presidents, her honeymoon ended after the second month in office.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Negative Stories During the First Three Months in Office</th>
<th>Frei</th>
<th>Lagos</th>
<th>Bachelet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Month</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Month</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Month</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Valid cases)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>(13)</td>
<td>(28)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Cramer’s V =.249, p <.001*

While this negative evaluation many not be necessarily gender-specific and could suggest a negative coverage of the individual, regardless the gender, the language and tone used reinforce the idea that this criticism is gender-biased.
In addition, the high expectations about Bachelet’s administration, as well as the fulfillment of those, were issues constantly addressed in the three newspapers analyzed: “The President and her administration have the great responsibility of not disappointing people” (La Tercera, March 12, 2006); “Mario Aguilera is upset. ‘We expected more of President Bachelet’, says the former TVN reporter” (Las Últimas Noticias, May 31, 2006); “Everybody is waiting for her to set the rhythm” (El Mercurio, May 7, 2006); “The president has everything to do a great job” (Las Últimas Noticias, March 12, 2006).

**The tone.** The results also support H2: the coverage about Bachelet was different in tone and that tone was connected with her gender. Ten percent of the stories stressed the fact that Bachelet was a woman, when it was not relevant for the story\(^3\), but only 1% of stories stressed gender for each male president. These mentions were present during the seven months analyzed and were not limited to the “first woman” frame that abounded during Bachelet’s first weeks in office. Thus, 87% of the stories in this sample that accentuated the gender of the president corresponded to stories about Bachelet, as well as 54% of the stories that emphasized personal traits and 69% of gender-defined background mentions, such as family roles or household chores.

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\(^3\) This gender mentions exclude the gender distinction in most nouns, pronouns and adjectives in Spanish. For example, Frei and Lagos were regarded as “presidente” or “mandatario”, whereas Bachelet was called “presidenta” and “mandataria”. 
Table 2. Comparison of Gender-Related References Highlighted in the Coverage of Three Presidents of Chile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Frei</th>
<th>Lagos</th>
<th>Bachelet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (a)</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Valid cases)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Traits (b)</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Valid cases)</td>
<td>(45)</td>
<td>(39)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender-Biased Background (c)</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Valid cases)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(24)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Cramer's $V = .213$, $p < .001$
(b) Cramer's $V = .125$, $p < .001$
(c) Cramer's $V = .264$, $p < .001$

Such a tone was present, for example, in an editorial addressing Chile-Argentina relations. After a series of diplomatic impasses, the Argentinean government refused a formal request by Chile to honor a previous agreement. Bachelet publicly said she did not understand why the Argentinean officials were acting like they did. The paper published: “Michelle Bachelet should understand that in strategic matters, bilateral affairs are not a personal issue. They are not solved by drinking tea with your pals, or talking over the phone with your new best friend” (La Tercera, September 12, 2006). Other articles made an issue as to whether a certain suit was a wrong choice because “it made her look fat” on her Inauguration Day (El Mercurio, March 12, 2006) or reported that “the wind caused a constant movement of her bangs” (Las Últimas Noticias, March 12, 2006). After some conflicts with some ministers,
she was depicted as “[just] a mom reprimanding her kids [in reference to members of the cabinet]” (El Mercurio, June 8, 2006).

- **The focus on the administration.** Just as H3 predicted, Bachelet’s administration was subject to intense scrutiny. Both her performance and competence were a more frequent subject, and her overall action in both domestic and foreign policy was often reported in negative terms. The issues regarding her administration were more likely to receive a negative evaluation, as shown in Table 3. However, that emphasis was not much different in comparison with her male predecessors. Yet, the emphasis on how she conducted the country’s affairs was constant.

**Table 3. A Comparison of Negative Coverage of Three Presidents of Chile**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Negative Stories</th>
<th>Frei</th>
<th>Lagos</th>
<th>Bachelet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presidency</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Policy</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Policy</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme Court</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Government</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Parties</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Valid cases)</td>
<td>(21)</td>
<td>(49)</td>
<td>(102)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cramer’s $V=.266$, $p <.05$

The analysis of the economy and the foreign policy were also more prone to be evaluated. Considering that prosperity and international relations are two of the main
components of the public evaluation of a president, it is likely that this emphasis will have an effect on the reader’s perceptions.

The competence of Bachelet was questioned since her first day in office, and extended throughout the seven months of this analysis. For example, an article about the state of the economy, said: “There is curiosity among business leaders. They wonder if this administration and the President have enough leadership skills to maintain the successful path the national economy has followed for the last seven years. [Businessman] Eliodoro Matte said: ‘I hope she has the guts to reject all those demands for increasing the public spending’”(La Tercera, August 27, 2006). A feature about the conflicts with the country’s main trade unions quoted the president of the federation of unions saying: “I wish the president were more up-to-date on the things happening under her administration, because she is being talking about things she does not know about” (El Mercurio, October 6, 2006).

• The experience and the performance. Although H4, a negative emphasis on Bachelet’s experience in politics, was not supported, there was support for H5: newspaper coverage of Bachelet’s performance was more negative. Twenty-two percent of newspaper coverage of Bachelet was negative, while 15% of Lagos’ newspaper coverage and only 7% of Frei’s newspaper coverage was negative.

According to Table 4, during the seven months considered in this analysis, Bachelet was consistently evaluated more negatively than the two male presidents that preceded her, Frei and Lagos.
Table 4. Overall Newspaper Evaluation of the Performance of Female and Male Presidents of Chile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Frei</th>
<th>Lagos</th>
<th>Bachelet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Valid cases)</td>
<td>(320)</td>
<td>(330)</td>
<td>(458)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ² = 40.243, d.f = 4, p < .001

Moreover, during March, most of the negative evaluation toward Bachelet was not explained or based on her standing on a specific issue, but rather her persona and her record in office. By the end of May, however most of the criticism was related to some specific issue. More importantly, 5% of the negative evaluation was based on her personal qualities (Cramer's V = .161, p < .001). “Plain,” “scripted,” “secretive”, “her lack of assertiveness,” “lack of direction,” and “yet another mistake”, are among some descriptions used to describe her doing her job.

The criticism of Bachelet was often presented in subtle ways. Although the findings were not statistically significant in terms of the main focus of the story, an analysis of the secondary focus of the news coverage revealed that Bachelet’s competence and performance in office were indeed themes during her first days in office. In these cases, the main story was related to a specific issue, like health care or economy, and then gave way to a discussion about the president’s performance or suitability for the job. For example, a story about changes to the public education system listed the proposed modifications and then argued that Bachelet “must show more toughness if she wants to convince the Council that this is the
right way to go” (El Mercurio, August 27, 2006). An op-ed piece about a strike by public employees, mentioned, halfway through the article, that Bachelet “already let that others lead the way in her administration. The main error of Bachelet has been her delay in showing where her administration is going. Presidents can make mistakes, but they cannot avoid making up their minds and making a decision” (La Tercera, October 14, 2006). Her closeness with one of the leaders of her party, Camilo Escalona, usually gave way to speculations that he was the actual person in power and Bachelet was just a façade.

• The public evaluation. When all three presidents were sworn in, they enjoyed relatively high approval ratings. According to the CEP poll, Frei and Lagos had a 56% approval rating during their first months, and Bachelet had a 57% approval rating (polls by other centers, such as Adimark or CERC, showed even higher numbers for Bachelet: 62% according to Adimark). Although by June, approval ratings had declined, Bachelet experienced the greatest drop. Thus, if Frei’s approval by his fourth month in office was 54% and Lagos’s was 49%, Bachelet’s approval was 44%, just after the media coverage showed a significant increase in criticism about her administration and her performance.

H6 was twofold. It predicted that the public would link evaluations to Bachelet and her male predecessor in a similar manner as the newspapers, as well as the importance assigned to certain issues during each administration. Thus, the hypothesis attempted to measure if the aspects emphasized by the newspapers about these three presidents were also the aspects emphasized by people when they were asked by the CEP poll. The findings tend to support this hypothesis.
Not all the attributes that were considered in the content analysis were measured in the CEP poll during the three administrations\(^4\). Because of that, a selection was made to do the chi-square tests. As a result, the comparison between press coverage and public perceptions (as revealed in the polls) considered four cognitive attributes or issues (economy, education, crime, and poverty) and one affective attribute or evaluation (performance, in terms of public approval).

Three of the five chi-square tests were not significant. Thus, three attributes showed a fit between the CEP survey results and the amount of newspaper coverage focusing on each issue. Therefore, the people did link the importance of education, economy and poverty to each president in concordance to the emphasis the press assigned to them while covering each administration (education: \(\chi^2=5.0882, p=.079\); economy: \(\chi^2=8.082, p=.18\); poverty: \(\chi^2=1.135, p=.567\))

In contrast, the other two chi-squares were statistically significant (\(p<.05\)). That was the case of the cognitive attribute of crime and the affective attribute of overall performance (this is, public approval). This means that media coverage of the presidents and the public opinion regarding these attributes did not match.

In addition, the tone of the coverage of performance seemed to support an agenda-setting effect regarding this attribute nonetheless: there is a link between the people who approved the administration and the amount of positive evaluations published (\(\chi^2=2.014, p=.365\)).

\(^4\) For example, the surveys about Frei and Lagos did not asked about indigenous people or international affairs. In a similar note, questions about leadership skills were absent in the case of Frei.
Discussion

Because more women are running for president than before, and more are actually being successful in that pursuit, it is important to examine news coverage when the president is a woman. This study aimed at examining whether the gender of the presidents affects how the press covers the honeymoon period of a new administration and the impact of these differences in the public. The results supported four out of six hypotheses (and showed partial support for a fifth one) and showed that women’s mere presence on the political scene still is regarded as a rarity and triggers a change.

The press cannot avoid covering the president, whether male or female. Thus, in terms of quantity, the news media could hardly minimize the importance of Bachelet. However, in general, the results show that the Chilean press used a gendered frame to cover the country’s first woman in the highest office. The news coverage emphasized the gender of president Bachelet and her personal traits, although in subtle ways: the focus seldom reflected straightforward sex-role stereotypes. Still, gratuitous sexist remarks did appear occasionally. In that sense, it is a surprise how little personal coverage Bachelet received. Although Eduardo Frei was the son of a former president, and many news articles recalled that fact, Bachelet’s life is not exempt of newsworthiness. Her background was occasionally mentioned, although the times that there was an emphasis on it, almost 60% of the cases were related to a gender-biased reference to it. In addition, her appearance was mostly mentioned when the subject of the story was an important ceremony, such as Inauguration Day, State of the Country, or Military Parade. Yet, neither Frei nor Lagos were subject to an analysis by “fashion experts” of the attire or hairdo they had those days. By focusing on those matters, the media trivialized not only the presidency, but also the woman in that office. Moreover, this
kind of reporting presented the president as a woman first, and then as a politician. If this happened on a regular basis, it could only undermine the legitimacy of the president as a leader and an important actor in conducting the affairs of the country.

Beyond the differences in quantity of coverage, the more noteworthy disparities are in the tone of the coverage, due to a gendered frame that permeated the press’s assessments and portrayals of the presidents. The study shows that while coverage for the presidents, whatever the gender, may appear balanced, discrepancies still exist. In other words, the stories about the different presidents may be similar, but the attitudes behind them are not. One out of five stories evaluated the performance of Bachelet in negative terms, almost from the beginning of her administration. Whereas the male presidents enjoyed at least three months of a honeymoon period, Bachelet barely had two months to enjoy such bliss. The public support, as shown on the CEP poll also experimented a rapid decline.

Why did the male presidents not endure this early criticism? One possible explanation may be in Bachelet’s gender and rare triumph. She was the first woman to win a presidential election in Chile. Her victory was marked as an historical event, especially in a country that is described as conservative and very male-dominated. Maybe her unprecedented election generated expectations that were hard to fulfill. The honeymoon benefit eroded as more realistic assessments of the president’s performance were possible. The contrast between reality and prospects showed that Bachelet was just another president, not a superwoman with special powers to solve every problem in the country, including those “inherited” from previous administrations. As Norris (1997) said, women in higher offices are seen as agents of change, a rather pervasive frame that sets women up to fail, as they prove unable to achieve the unrealistically high expectations. Thus, although it could be argued that the media malady...
was directed to *the individual* and not necessarily *the woman*, the tone of the discussion and the focus of the coverage suggest that her gender was at least referred as an explanation to Bachelet’s eventual weaknesses as a leader.

A surprising and positive finding is the lack of support for H4. Indeed, Bachelet was not openly criticized in the media for being a newcomer in politics and the criticism of her performance did not mention as problematic her lack of experience in comparison with other higher officials. It may be due to the media not wanting to appear as openly criticizing her or perhaps her experience was not really an issue: she did not have great political relevance prior to the year 2000, but she was never a political neophyte.

It is troublesome, however, that Bachelet was on occasion depicted as a woman when it was not relevant to the story. Moreover, even after she was sworn in as president, her leadership skills and fitness for office were subject to more coverage that that of the other two presidents. That kind of questioning was also present during her campaign as a candidate (Valenzuela & Correa, 2006). Was the media trying to prove a self-fulfilled prophecy? They argued that she might not have the skills to do the job before. By focusing on her achievements and qualities, especially during her first month in office, maybe the press was trying to make its case. Thus, it seemed that Bachelet won the vote, but not the media.

The gendered mediation of her administration occurred even when Bachelet—who had to endure that media focused on her personal traits—also had already shown some traits associated with a man: before running for the presidency, she was the Defense Minister for almost four years, and was quite popular and successful holding such a male-associated position. Thus, it appeared that news media penalized a woman for venturing in a male pursuit. A generally negative statement about Bachelet could manifest skepticism of
newspeople about her qualifications: adjectives as “naïve,” “scripted,” or “disloyal” are a less obvious way to criticize, but a critique nonetheless.

Thereby, the Chilean press can be seen as contributing to the marginalization of women in public life. Their portrayal of this particular female leader did encourage sex role stereotypes. Bachelet often was depicted as a mother instead of an authority and officeholder. In those cases, the media focused more on the person than in her responsibilities.

However, not everything was negative. Some evidence suggested that the news media were not always hostile towards Bachelet. There were stories that did not focus on her gender, nor her suitability or her personal qualities. Sometimes, the media put the politician first, and then the woman (if they did that at all). Although Bachelet, in many accounts, broke the mold when she became president, her emergence as a leader was seldom the focus of the stories – she was not portrayed as an outsider winning against the odds.

In addition, this study showed that there was a positive relationship between media attention to presidential performance and public evaluation of that official. The three newspapers appear to have a role in influencing the issues and achievements that Chilean people linked to Frei, Lagos, and Bachelet. Media coverage and public perceptions were closely related on the areas of economy, education, and poverty. In these three areas, public perceptions about the presidents matched the amount of coverage that each president received. Thus, the results suggest the agenda of attributes mentioned in newspaper articles influenced the agenda of attributes that people linked to the presidents. The exception of crime may be related to the obtrusive nature of this issue. Unlike areas such as foreign affairs and national politics, it is one with which people can have daily personal experiences. This can influence the development of public attitudes.
Overall, the results of this study support the notion that the Chilean press covered male and female presidents differently and that gender was a factor in the media’s portrayal of the president. It shows that coverage is still different for men and women leaders and offers a finer assessment of gendered media representations. As such, it can help to develop strategies to improve them (see for example, Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996).

However, the research has limitations. It is just one case study, in one particular setting: its results cannot be projected to other societies. For that, more studies are needed, but the upcoming presidential elections in the United States, as well as other countries, can provide new settings to try these and other hypotheses about the gendered mediation of politicians. Also, this investigation employed only one public opinion poll for each term, thus limiting the measures of agenda-setting effects. In other words, there is no clarity on the order of causation between the press agenda and the public agenda. The influence of the presidents’ own agenda, as expressed in their communications (such as press conferences, documents, policy), can and should also be addressed. In addition, non-verbal contents were excluded from this analysis, although pictures can also show the attitude of the journalist when reporting on the government and the portrayal the news media is presenting to the audience.

As it is, this study is just an exploratory inquiry in one particular sub-issue. The portrayal of the president as a leader, and the role of gender in it, can also be studied in other, complementary ways. An analysis of leadership traits in context, such as constraints and decision-making environment can be a helpful approach (see, for example, the work of Bell, Hargrove & Theakston, 1999). If the interest is in the role of the media, a study of the work of the press corps and their interactions with higher officials (e.g., press conferences) may offer a valuable insight into the attitude of the press toward the president. All of these alternatives
could help clarify how exactly the news media reacts when the president is a woman. The fact that more voters are choosing a female to lead their countries around the world offers new opportunities to conduct this kind of comparative studies. Moving forward, researchers should also consider the differences at the national or international level.

References


