

SEM28. Women represented: Investigating gender dynamics in political discourse

11 September h. 16:00-18:30, S7 Moro

Convenors

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Abstract

Ensuring women's visibility, influence, and voice in the public sphere is a hallmark of democracy. Women's representation in politics grew steadily throughout the twentieth century, as they gradually overcame structural barriers and accessed more domains of public life. However, in 2025, the outlook for women's political participation appears grim. Conservative, authoritarian, paternalistic leaders, under the pretence of "protecting women", are increasingly re-framing women's rights (e.g., bodily autonomy, education, equal pay, political participation) not as universal human rights but as "special" rights tied to pro-life, pro-family and pro-marriage values. Recent backlash and pushback against gender equality, amplified by social media platforms, the growing reach of the so-called manosphere, and political developments such as Trump 2.0, further underscore the urgency to examine how gender is constructed, contested, and instrumentalized in the public sphere.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches that have examined how language reflects and shapes gender dynamics (Angouri & Baxter, 2021, Esposito, 2023, Lazar, 2005, Romaniuk & Ehrlich, 2018, among others), this seminar seeks contributions that explore political discourse focused on women as politicians, advocates, and subjects of mediated narratives. It considers discourses surrounding women's political representation and issues such as reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and objectification, through a range of frameworks and approaches, including (M)CDS, feminist CDA, narrative analysis, pragmatics, and corpus linguistics, to investigate intersections among language, gender, power, agency, and ideology.

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SEM28. Papers

11 September h. 16:00-18:30, S7 Moro

- *The long journey towards breaking the US political glass ceiling: From Fannie Lou Hamer to AOC* (Nicoletta Vasta, Università degli Studi di Udine)
- *"Ellen wants to be President": Press coverage of Ellen McCormack's 1976 presidential primary campaign* (Polina Shvanyukova, Università degli Studi di Udine)
- *"In my opinion she has a very low IQ": A critical discourse analysis of Donald Trump's delegitimation strategies to disempower female politicians* (Ester Di Silvestro, Università di Catania)
- *The "childless cat ladies" phenomenon. A discourse analysis of media coverage of JD Vance's comment on female democratic politicians* (Roberta Iacovelli, Università di Catania)
- *Red-pilled rhetoric: A corpus-assisted multimodal analysis of the manosphere's representation of U.S. women politicians* (Jacqueline Aiello, Università degli Studi di Salerno)

SEM28. Abstracts

Red-pillled rhetoric: A corpus-assisted multimodal analysis of the manosphere's representation of U.S. women politicians

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The manosphere, an online network “that proactively advocates misogynistic, anti-feminist, and anti-gender egalitarian positions, and promotes the resentment and hatred of women” (Barnes & Karim 2025, p. 2), has both fueled and been emboldened by Donald Trump's political (re)ascendancy. Its disparate subgroups coalesce around the ‘Red Pill’ ideology, which purports to liberate men of feminism's alleged misandry and systemic subjugation by women (Ging, 2019), and employ emergent, often idiosyncratic, strategies to claim credibility, assert epistemic authority, and aggregate members (McGlashan & Krendel, 2024). Against the backdrop of a mounting backlash to gender equality, the present study examines the representation of U.S. women politicians in the Christian Men's Rights (CMR) movement, a highly interactive, solidarity-driven faction of the manosphere that pursues structural change through coordinated activism and overt political mobilization (Barnes & Karim, 2025). Building on prior analyses of delegitimization tactics employed by Fox News anchors in their coverage of U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Aiello, 2023), this study explores how leading CMR-affiliated voices discursively position and undermine prominent women in or seeking political office in the United States. A corpus-assisted multimodal analysis of a purposive sample of CMR Twitter/X posts and YouTube podcasts from the first half of 2025 targeting female politicians is conducted using NVivo to identify and examine the evaluative language, intertextual references, recontextualization strategies, and ‘evidence-based misogyny’ – a micro-political tactic that uses selectively curated ‘evidence’ to essentialize misogyny in gender relations (Rothermel, 2023) – present within these artifacts. By unearthing the discursive and visual mechanisms that generate gendered political antagonism and position female politicians in these online conservative and anti-feminist spaces, this study lays bare the inner workings of insidious misogyny and instrumentalization of gender, exposes the threats that digital misogyny poses to women's political representation, and underscores the urgency for counter-discourses that engender more equitable political imaginaries.

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“In my opinion she has a very low IQ”: A critical discourse analysis of Donald Trump's delegitimation strategies to disempower female politicians

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Although the number of women in relevant political roles on the international stage is growing (Zamfirache, 2010), politics still seems a public sphere dominated by men (Liu, 2019). In this context, gender stereotypes have always had a significant impact on women and limited their participation in the decision-making processes (Liu, 2019). The gender gap in politics is still quite evident and is mostly influenced by how women are portrayed – especially by the media that tends to reiterate representations with gender implications (Di Silvestro & Venuti, 2024) – and, in turn, how they unconsciously view themselves. The United States are undoubtedly one of the most glaring instances of the gender gap and the continued influence of gender stereotypes on how people perceive women. Only two female candidates (Clinton and Harris) made it to the final rounds of the presidential campaign and both were defeated by Donald Trump, who is well-known for his populist, aggressive and misogynistic communication style (Di Silvestro, 2025; Scotto di Carlo, 2020).

This work aims to investigate how Donald Trump represented Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris in the course of the electoral campaigns, paying particular attention to the gender implications embedded in his delegitimation strategies. In order to achieve this goal, the strategies used by Donald Trump to delegitimize Joe Biden will be analysed as well and compared to the ones used for Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris. Thirty key speeches (ten per politician) delivered by Donald Trump during the last three months of the 2016, 2020 and 2024 US electoral campaigns will be collected on the website The American Presidency Project and on the YouTube channel Right Side Broadcasting Network. The data will be organised into three corpora and will be analysed focusing on the representational strategies and the textual semiotic choices (Machin & Mayr, 2023; van Dijk, 1998) used by Trump to describe his opponents – foregrounding the gender implications of such choices (Lazar, 2005).

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The “childless cat ladies” phenomenon. A discourse analysis of media coverage of JD Vance's comment on female democratic politicians.

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In 2021, JD Vance lamented that the future of the U.S. was (then) in the hands of “childless cat ladies”, referring to the female democratic politicians with no kids, running the country – implicitly maintaining they had no personal stake in the country's future. When this comment resurfaced on the internet in July 2024, many women (and men) took to social media platforms to make their case that women's social value does not depend on the number of children they may or may not have. Both the remark and the ensuing public response garnered widespread media attention. While research has shown that media's biased representation of female politicians contributes to inhibiting women's participation in the field (e.g., Kittilson & Friedkin, 2008), media coverage of this incident showed an unexpected, supportive, approach.

This study aims to investigate how the media can negotiate representations of women and ideas about their role in society, thus challenging the *status quo* in politics. To do so, it presents the results of a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis (Baker, 2006) of newspaper articles published on the incident by the top 5 U.S. Newspapers (by web visitors) - the Wall Street Journal, the NY Times, the NY Post, the Washington Post, and USA Today - published online between July 2024 (after the 2021 comment was made public again) and November 2024 (with the Trump-Vance election). The present investigation is thus concerned with *discourses* (Fairclough, 1992) used in the media to challenge the conservative view of women's role in society. It aims to show how, by challenging stereotypes on women in their articles, newspapers generated *new discourses*, ultimately favouring a reframed view of women's “feminine role” and “professional value” (particularly in politics). The results of the study will contribute to the understanding of the “gendered pageantry of politics” and of the impact of media representations on women's political participation as reflecting entrenched gender norms (see Laher, 2014).

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“Ellen wants to be President”: Press coverage of Ellen McCormack’s 1976 presidential primary campaign

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Drawing on existing research that has examined media representations of women in politics and leadership positions (Cameron & Shaw, 2020; Chałupnik, Mackenzie, Mullany & Vilar-Lluch, 2025; Heckman, Bhargava & Ndulue, 2025; Mullany & Yoong, 2016), this paper analyzes a sample of campaign coverage taken from US national newspapers of Ellen McCormack’s bid to win the presidential nomination in the 1976 Democratic primaries. Supported by right-to-life activist organizations, McCormack ran as a single-issue, pro-life candidate who championed the passage of the Human Life Amendment (HLA). The launch of a single-issue national presidential candidate was an attention-grabbing strategy that pro-lifers (successfully) used to get media attention on the abortion issue in the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade* (1973). When McCormack, who had never run for political office before, became the first female presidential candidate in US history to qualify for federal campaign funds and Secret Service protection, the media started to take her campaign seriously. The present investigation thus focuses on the discursive construction of an unprecedented media event in which a woman presidential candidate leveraged pro-life rhetoric to position herself as a defender of conservative Christian values (Williams 2016). The analysis starts by identifying key themes in the press coverage of Ellen McCormack’s candidacy and her anti-abortion agenda (e.g., the use of federal campaign funds, a one-issue candidacy) and then examines the inventory of the rhetorical and linguistic devices employed to either amplify or discredit McCormack’s pro-life rhetoric.

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The long journey towards breaking the US political glass ceiling: From Fannie Lou Hamer to AOC

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In their different ways, all the women – Ferraro, Clinton, Palin and Harris – who have so far undertaken the journey as Presidential and Vice-Presidential nominees in the USA have come up against the glass ceiling. Yet, despite their setbacks, their efforts have led the way for other women to pick up the torch. As Hillary Rodham Clinton put it in her 2016 concession speech, “I know we have still not shattered that highest and hardest glass ceiling, but someday someone will and hopefully sooner than we might think right now” (Rodham Clinton 2016, at 14’29”). That someone could well be Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, aka AOC.

As Democratic Congresswoman and Representative for New York’s 14th Congressional District, AOC is both the youngest woman ever to be elected to the US Congress, but more significantly, along with Fannie Lou Hamer in the 1950s and ‘60s, one of the few women who, by matching their political actions with remarkable storytelling skills, have shattered the glass ceiling of male domination in the higher echelons of US Administration (Aiello 2023; Vasta 2023b). AOC’s 10-minute statement, on July 23, 2020, seeking recognition for verbal harassment by Congress veteran, yet hitherto virtually unknown Republican Representative Ted Yoho, “became an instant classic and went viral for its direct indictment of a culture of misogyny and harassment of women in the workplace” (<https://www.thnk.org/blog/anatomy-of-a-speech-aoc/>).

In a diachronic perspective, AOC’s statement against gender-based violence can be analyzed as one of the historic moments in the journey that defines breaking the glass ceiling in terms of changing culture and mindsets, one that follows in the footsteps of Fannie Lou Hamer, who struggled against efforts to prevent her from exercising her right to vote and

against none other than President Johnson, who tried to prevent her from making her voice heard with her *DNC Testimony* and other speeches (Vasta 2023a, 2024). Integrating the tools offered by Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Vasta 2023a) and the Discourse Historical Approach (Martin & Wodak 2003; Wodak 2011), the contribution will investigate the interface between gendered identities, agency, power and ideology through various instances of how AOC seems to be lining up with those who, maybe unintentionally and certainly within different socio-historical circumstances, followed in Fannie Lou Hamer's footsteps.

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