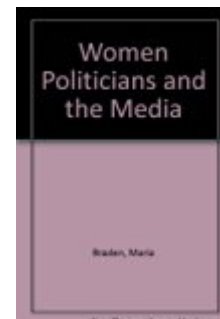


**Maria Braden.** *Women Politicians and the Media*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996. 235 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-1970-0.



**Reviewed by** Cynthia Harrison

**Published on** H-Women (January, 1997)

"Geraldine Ferraro .... The first woman to be nominated for Vice President.... Size six!" (p. 15).

So commented Tom Brokaw to the television audience, while Ferraro accepted the cheers of Democratic delegates during their 1984 party convention. As Maria Braden, professor of journalism at the University of Kentucky, points out in this anecdotal survey, Brokaw's focus on Ferraro's dress size at so historic a moment has typified the media's handling of women political figures. Braden observes that the media report about women in stereotypical ways, emphasizing their femininity and highlighting family relationships, appearance, and clothing--aspects infrequently mentioned when reporting about men. Although Braden sees improvement, in part because of the increasing numbers of women in journalism, she notes that lapses frequently occur.

Braden begins her chronological narrative with the tale of Jeannette Rankin's reception by the press. As the first woman elected to Congress, in 1916, the Montana Republican predictably drew much media attention, but reporters sought to reassure readers about her femininity rather

than to enlighten them on her policy agenda. Once she cast her first vote--against U.S. participation in World War I--newspapers questioned both her personal patriotism and her presumptively sex-based inability to reason (though 49 of her male colleagues also voted against war). Braden devotes almost seven pages to Rankin, which makes this sketch one of the longer ones; but beyond learning that the press at times trivialized this pioneer, we learn little else. The furor over her second term and her vote--this time alone--against U.S. entry into World War II, Braden dispatches in two sentences. After Rankin, Braden deals briefly in turn with Alice Mary Robertson (R-OK), elected in 1920, Winifred Huck (R-IL), also in 1920, Rebecca Felton, a bigoted Democrat from Georgia who served fewer than 48 hours in the Senate in 1922, and the women who entered Congress after them.

The problem with Braden's organization shows up clearly when Edith Nourse Rogers (R-MA), like the others, rates only one paragraph. Rogers, who succeeded her husband in the House in 1925, served 35 years, a career during which,

as Braden notes, she was much respected for her legislative skill. Mary Norton, a Democrat from New Jersey, represented her district in the House for 25 years, chairing the House Committee on Labor during passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act. Again, Braden limits her discussion, this time to two paragraphs, thus missing the opportunity to use the careers of Norton and Rogers (and those of other women who served over decades) to examine a host of questions: Does the salience of sex decline in the media with time and authority? Are all women Congress members treated in the same way and, if not, what accounts for the differences? Are some newspapers or reporters ahead of their time in the non-sexist assessment of women legislators and, if so, why? Rather, Braden follows the disposition of the press to focus on the attractive, not the powerful, women in office. Chapter 3, "The 'Glamour Girls' of Congress," describes the perils and foibles of Helen Gahagan Douglas and Clare Boothe Luce, who between them served a total of ten years in Congress and who left little statutory legacy.

Braden relinquishes her strict chronology and thumbnail biographies once she gets to 1970, and the latter two-thirds of the book benefit from the more topical organization. Braden observes that the "women angle" becomes a benefit to some women with the rise of the women's movement and the growing distaste for the seasoned politician. A brief chapter on Bella Abzug explores, in a thoughtful way, the media role in capitalizing on a flamboyant woman political figure whose actions provoked controversy. Braden continues this discussion in subsequent chapters on the debate about when gender is a relevant aspect of a candidate's vita and when it is a gratuitous focus, designed to delegitimize a candidate.

Yet her discussion of the 1980s and 1990s falters again because Braden tries to assess too many races in which women participate rather than analyzing a few. Anecdotes proliferate, but we receive little help in distinguishing merely shoddy

reportage from sexist reporting. Chapters on Ferraro's run for vice-president in 1984, the "Year of the Woman" (i.e., 1992), and the Holtzman-Ferraro-Abrams primary fight the same year, rest upon candidates' impressions of media treatment, not Braden's independent interpretation. The final chapter on women officeholders concludes that the situation is improving, but Braden omits a discussion of gendered reporting with respect to the "angry white male" who figured so prominently in 1994 and who therefore deserves some mention.

More important, Braden does not do justice to the impact of the phenomenal feminist tidal wave that swept the national landscape. She mentions the Stanford University Women's News Service but fails to remark on its genesis or on the impact overall of the women's movement on the media. When she recounts briefly (in a penultimate chapter) the role that women as journalists have played covering women and their own experiences as women in a male profession, again the treatment is cursory. She recounts, for example, that in 1948, Pauline Frederick became a full-time political reporter at ABC News. During the 1950s, her beat was the United Nations and in 1960 she anchored the network's radio convention coverage. But Braden offers not a word to explain this unusual success.

In lieu of close explication, Braden relies on interviews, a handful of published studies and biographies, and illustrations from contemporary newspapers to support some modest observations. Assessing the contemporary political scene, Braden notes that if the media began by focusing on women's appearance and holding them to higher standards of rectitude, by 1995 such treatment now extends to men. Private lives of candidates and politicians, male and female, have become fair game for "investigative reporting," and the press now routinely comments on President Clinton's physique. The presence of women reporters helps to call attention to new stories and

new angles but, Braden cautions, cannot guarantee fair coverage or even more attention to women newsmakers.

She ends her book with a discussion of women who ran for president--all of whom she applauds--from the maverick Victoria Woodhull to the pragmatic Pat Schroeder, although the impact of the media is difficult to assess from her discussion. Braden concludes the chapter and the volume with a remark from Eleanor Clift, that journalists should realize "that the gender of a woman politician is the least remarkable thing about her." But if, in 1997, that statement is true, we need to ask why it makes any difference to have women elected to office.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

**Citation:** Cynthia Harrison. Review of Braden, Maria. *Women Politicians and the Media*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. January, 1997.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=765>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.