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# Constructing Women's "Different Voice": Gendered Mediation in the 2015 UK General Election

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## Abstract

Since the 1990s, media commentators in the UK and elsewhere have praised women for introducing a “visibly different style of politics”, one symbol of which is the alleged preference of female politicians for a less adversarial and more co-operative style of political speech. Drawing on an analysis of the 2015 UK General Election campaign, we argue that this notion of women’s “different voice” has become increasingly central to the media’s construction of prominent female politicians as public figures, despite the evidence that it does not reflect any clear-cut pattern of differentiation between male and female political speakers of equivalent status and experience. Though it may seem to be an advance on previous negative representations of female politicians, we suggest that it reproduces—albeit in a “modernized” form—the long-established tendency of the media to evaluate women in relation to gendered norms and expectations, while men are judged as individuals.

**Keywords:** *election debates, gendered mediation, speech style, UK politics, women.*

## 1. Introduction

In February 2019, eight Labour MPs and three Conservatives broke away from their parties to form what was initially known as “The Independent Group”.<sup>1</sup> The defectors’ self-declared motives included opposition to Brexit, concern about the way both main parties had moved away from the political

centre-ground, and in the case of some Labour MPs, dismay about the party's handling of anti-Semitism in its ranks. But it did not escape the media's notice that a majority of the new group's members—seven out of eleven, including all the former Conservatives—were women. According to an article in the *Manchester Evening News* (Williams 2019) this was “not an insignificant detail”. After quoting the Conservative defector Heidi Allen, who had explained her disaffection by saying, “I believed I was part of a party that worked collaboratively and had the empathy to feel”, the writer commented that “Britain's political language is not one currently defined by empathy, understanding or cooperation. It is one of traitors and mutineers, of verbal missiles lobbed across ideological trenches. Of squaring up. For many women on both sides of the ditches—including those who walked away to a truce this week—that now feels increasingly oppressive”.

Though it is presented here as a consequence of the current polarization of British politics, in fact there is nothing new about the idea that women are alienated from a political culture in which opponents “square up” to lob “verbal missiles” at one another. That observation belongs to a discourse which has featured prominently in British political commentary since the 1990s. Deployed frequently in the media, and not uncommonly by female politicians themselves, it is an expression of what we have called “the different voice ideology” (Cameron and Shaw 2016), according to which women do politics differently from men.

The phrase “different voice” alludes to the work of the psychologist Carol Gilligan, whose influential book *In A Different Voice* (Gilligan 1982) investigated the influence of gender on moral decision-making, characterizing the differences between men and women in terms of a series of oppositions such as autonomy/interdependence, rights/needs, justice/care. What we are calling “the different voice ideology” carries these oppositions into the domain of politics and political communication. As in Gilligan's original work, the notion of “voice” can function as a metaphor for a broad range of qualities and attitudes that allegedly differentiate female from male political actors, influencing anything from their reasons for going into politics to the political issues they tend to be most concerned with. But “voice” may also be used in a more literal way, referencing the idea that women *communicate* differently from men. In some form or other, that idea is widely attested across

cultures and historical periods (Cameron 2007), but the particular form of it that concerns us here is one that became popular in the 1990s after it was laid out in Deborah Tannen's bestselling book *You Just Don't Understand* (Tannen 1990). Tannen's central claim, which was itself influenced by Gilligan's work, was that men's speech-style is typically competitive and status-seeking, whereas women's is cooperative and consensus-seeking. This overarching opposition provides the foundation for a now-pervasive discourse on gender and politics in which women are said to find the prevailing, "male" style of political communication "oppressive", and to prefer a "political language...defined by empathy, understanding and cooperation".

By 1997, when the UK General Election that brought Tony Blair's "New" Labour to power also brought a record number of women into Parliament, this understanding of men's and women's differing communication styles had become firmly lodged in the popular consciousness, prompting numerous commentators to suggest that the advent of so many new women MPs would change the "bear garden" culture of Westminster. Some of the new MPs themselves spoke in positive terms about women's "different voice": Julia Drown, for instance, the newly-elected Labour member for Swindon South, observed that "women are more co-operative in the way they work. They're not so into scoring points, and more interested in hearing different points of view". Her colleague Gisela Stuart concurred, noting that "democracy is about consensus, not imposing will" (quoted Cameron 1997: np). A few years later, when Sarah Childs interviewed a sample of the 1997 intake, women MPs referred frequently to the linguistic differences they perceived between themselves and their male counterparts, telling Childs that they favoured a "less combative and aggressive style", with "less standing up and shouting on the floor of the House" and more collaboration behind the scenes. They also claimed to eschew "babble [and] jargon", and to avoid such "male" practices as making cutting remarks while others were speaking, unnecessarily repeating others' points, or talking just for the sake of talking (Childs 2004: 5-6). Shaw (2006) elicited similar comments in her own interviews with women MPs.

In what follows we will argue that the "different voice" ideology, and the associated characterization of women's political speech as more co-operative and empathetic than men's, has

come to play a central role in the media's representation of female politicians and political leaders—a point we will illustrate by drawing on our analysis of the way the UK press represented the three women party leaders who featured in the 2015 UK General Election campaign (hereafter “GE2015”)—Nicola Sturgeon of the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood and the Green Party's Natalie Bennett. We will also suggest, however, that this representation is problematic in several respects. One problem with it from an analytic point of view is its lack of correspondence with the empirical evidence about men's and women's communicative behaviour in political settings. But in addition, we will suggest, it is problematic ideologically: despite its surface positivity, at a deeper level it may constitute an obstacle to sex equality in the domain of politics.

## **2. Gendered mediation and the representation of women's political speech**

Our case study of GE2015 (reported in detail in Cameron and Shaw 2016) centred on the two nationally televised party leaders' debates that were the most significant media events of the campaign. Broadcast on April 2 by ITV and April 16 by the BBC, they involved seven party leaders in total: the three women already listed, and four men (David Cameron for the Conservatives, Nick Clegg for the Liberal Democrats, Labour's Ed Miliband and Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party (UKIP)). In the first debate, which featured all seven leaders, the men slightly outnumbered the women; in the second, “Challengers” debate, however, which excluded Cameron and Clegg as the leaders of the incumbent coalition government, that balance was reversed, producing the unprecedented spectacle of a national political debate in which women outnumbered men. More generally, it was the first time a group of female politicians had featured so prominently in a UK General Election campaign, and the media attention they received reflected this novelty.<sup>2</sup>

Here our main interest is in the media's treatment of the women leaders, and the discussion of our findings will therefore focus mainly on the second part of our GE2015 study, in which we examined the way these women were represented in press coverage of the campaign. However, an important piece of context for that discussion relates to the first part of the study, in which we carried

out a systematic analysis of the leaders' behaviour in the two debates themselves. One of our key questions was whether the women's performance in this context (one where all participants had notionally the same status as leaders of their parties, and were subject to exactly the same rules of engagement) would display the characteristics predicted by the "different voice" ideology, such as a greater reluctance to compete for the floor or a preference for "empathy and cooperation". In the event our analysis provided no empirical support for the belief that men and women have different debating styles. Though we did find individual differences, there was no clear pattern of gender differentiation.<sup>3</sup> All leaders made strategic use of both competitive and cooperative strategies; the most overtly "combative and aggressive" performances, as indicated by the frequency of interruptions and other uninvited turns, direct/unmitigated challenges to others' points and resistance to the authority of the moderator, were those of one man, Nigel Farage, and one woman, Nicola Sturgeon.

These findings were not unexpected, since they echo what has been reported by other analysts of TV election debates. In their research on US Senate and gubernatorial debates, Banwart and McKinney (2005) found that male and female candidates performed similarly on a range of measures, including the use of negative attacks on opponents, whether they appealed to voters on the basis of logic or emotion, which political issues they chose to focus on and which character traits they alluded to in stressing their credentials for office. These researchers also observed a tendency for candidates of both sexes to shift between stereotypically "masculine" and "feminine" strategies, which they referred to as "gendered adaptiveness" (Banwart and McKinney 2005: 370). In a more recent study of US gubernatorial election debates, Adams (2015) found that the linguistic strategies employed by female candidates were diverse rather than uniform, and that they rarely emphasized gender in the design of their own performances.

Yet these findings should not be taken to mean that gender is irrelevant to the construction of politicians' personae. The communication of gender is not accomplished only through a speaker's own behaviour, but also in the reception of that behaviour by others: even if there is no objective evidence that women speak in a "different voice" from their male counterparts, the ideological belief that they are (or should be) different may affect the way their speech is perceived and evaluated. It

may also exert a powerful influence on the way it is represented by the media—an important consideration, given that in contemporary conditions most people encounter political speech primarily if not exclusively in mediated form, and politicians themselves design their linguistic performances with that in mind. The point has often been made that mediation is itself a gendered process, and it has been argued that this process disadvantages female politicians. Since the prototypical politician is assumed to be a man, women are easily framed as “deviant”, flouting not only the norms of politics, but also the more general societal rules which define gender-appropriate behaviour. As Sreberny and Ross observe (1996: 110), this divergence from conventional expectations “carries with it social penalties which often speak in the register of hysteria or aberration”.

Along those lines, the Canadian researchers Gidengil and Everitt (2003) investigated the representation of male and female party leaders’ speech in TV news reports on the Canadian General Election campaigns of 1993 and 1997. Focusing on what might seem like a minor detail—what verbs of speaking were used to report leaders’ public utterances—they discovered that women leaders’ statements were significantly more likely than men’s to be reported using verbs that implied an aggressive stance, such as *attack*, *blast*, *fire*, *lash out*, *shoot back*. Men’s speech, though objectively no less aggressive, was typically reported using the maximally neutral verbs *say* and *tell*. This difference reflects the common-sense understanding of aggressiveness as a masculine trait, which is therefore perceived as unremarkable in men, whereas in women it is both more noticeable and less acceptable. The attention drawn to it by the media’s linguistic choices is likely, Gidengil and Everitt suggest (2003: 227), to influence the way women are perceived by media audiences:

Aggressive speech verbs elicit negative affect, whether the purported speaker is male or female, but gendered mediation means that female candidates are more likely to be portrayed as blasting, attacking, and accusing. As a result, viewers are likely to form a more negative impression of female candidates.

These researchers also found that where women sought to avoid negative judgments by adopting a “low-key, nonconfrontational style”, their words simply did not attract media coverage. It seems that female politicians are caught in a double bind: if their behaviour does not conform to stereotypical

expectations they will be represented as aggressive and unlikeable, but if they perform in conventionally “feminine” ways they will be marginalized or ignored.

Many of these points have since been supported by analyses of the way the media represented Hillary Clinton during her unsuccessful campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008 (Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Meeks 2013). When Clinton emphasized her authority, competence and toughness she was described as intimidating and “cold”, but her attempts to project “feminine” warmth and empathy, and her occasional involuntary displays of vulnerability, were immediately met with the criticism that she was weak. The same pattern recurred in 2016, when Clinton won the nomination, but lost the election itself to Donald Trump. This recent, high-profile example underlines the strength and longevity of traditional sexist tropes in political reporting and commentary. However, our analysis of the GE2015 press coverage suggests that women’s difference may also be framed in other, seemingly more positive ways. Though individual leaders were sometimes discussed in a “register of hysteria and aberration”, “the women” collectively were more often presented, drawing on the “different voice” ideology, as a refreshing alternative to what one commentator called “the eternal line-up of identikit men”. In the following section we will look more closely at the use of this discourse in GE2015 press coverage, and ask whether it is really as progressive as it might appear.

### **3. “It was the women wot won it”: the press coverage of GE2015**

The media showed considerable interest in the three female party leaders who participated in the GE2015 TV debates.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it might be thought that the women received a disproportionate share of the attention, given that two of them, Bennett and Wood, were virtually unknown before the campaign, and as leaders of parties which occupied a marginal position in UK national politics they were never likely to influence the election’s outcome. Their elevation to the status of national political figures, which was entirely a consequence of their participation in the debates, reflected the “presidential” nature of recent UK election coverage, which has tended increasingly to focus on the actions, words and personalities of individual party leaders. This focus on leaders is usually also a



focus on men: in 2015 only one of the UK's major parties had ever had a woman leader, and it had still had only one (Margaret Thatcher). The most senior female politician in Britain, Theresa May (who was then Home Secretary and would later become the second woman to lead the Conservatives), received fewer mentions during GE2015 than Samantha Cameron, the Prime Minister's wife (Loughborough University Communication Research Centre 2015). In that context, the attention paid to the three women who participated in the debates accords with the principles outlined in earlier accounts of gendered mediation: the novelty of women's participation in high-profile political events makes them newsworthy, and the result may be a degree of attention which men in the same roles would not attract; but precisely for that reason, their gender often becomes the main focus of the coverage they receive.

Gender was an important theme in media coverage of the GE2015 debates. Despite the very obvious differences among them (no two participants presented a starker contrast than the self-assured Nicola Sturgeon, an experienced politician whose main job was running a small country, and the visibly nervous Natalie Bennett, a newcomer to politics whose public profile had been virtually non-existent before the campaign), a significant strand in press commentary treated "the women" as a single homogeneous entity, whose shared communication style was then contrasted with that of "the men". An extract from a piece published in the *Yorkshire Post* just after the election ("Nicola Sturgeon has inspired women and given hope", May 8) will serve to illustrate the themes that recurred in this strand of campaign coverage. It begins: "It was around 1am on polling night when I finally switched off the TV, disappointed and irritated that yet again, two men were arguing, loudly, irascibly. I can't recall who they were now...", and goes on to argue that the leaders' debates had offered a glimpse of a different way of doing politics:

There were three women...not just holding their own, but setting new standards, openly supportive of each other, straightforward, fair, no bullying, no posturing. Frankly, they made the men look uniformly grey, out of date, superficial, even trivial.

"The men" are associated here with a traditional, markedly agonistic style of political speech: they argue, interrupt, bully and posture. "The women" by contrast do none of those things: they are

straightforward, fair and “openly supportive of each other”. Whereas the male style is described as “out of date”, the female alternative “sets new standards”: it shows that political discourse does not have to consist, in the words of the Labour MP Harriet Harman (quoted in the *Independent*, 20 April 2015), of “a group of men shouting at each other”.

These sentiments had been expressed throughout the campaign. Commentators of both sexes, writing for newspapers whose political allegiances spanned a range from right-wing Conservative-supporting (e.g. the *Telegraph* and the *Mail*) to Labour-supporting centre-left (the *Guardian*, the *Mirror*), made use of the same opposition between “the women” and “the men”, and described their differing communication styles with reference to the same characteristics (e.g. men shout and interrupt, women listen and support). There was also a remarkable degree of consensus that the women’s style was superior to the men’s, enabling the female leaders to “win” the debates. After the first debate, for instance, headlines included “Nigel Farage lost the debate and the women were the winners” (*Mirror*, 2 April); “Leaders debate: it was the women wot won it” (*Guardian*, 3 April); “The women took on Nigel while the men blamed each other” (*Times*, 3 April); and “Gentlemen, you are the weakest link” (*Sunday Times*, 5 April). This theme resurfaced in retrospective summaries at the end of the campaign. On polling day the *Mirror* opined that “women were the best performers” (“It’s been a kitchen nightmare”, 7 May); the next day a *Telegraph* article suggested that women’s “thoughtful, measured contributions” to the TV debates had “brought a certain dignity to an occasion which could have descended into chaos and rancour” (“How women took centre stage in a man’s world”, 8 May). This sense that the women leaders had modelled a new style of political speech persisted after the campaign. A few months later, commenting on another election whose outcome was, at least in gender terms, a victory for the old order—the Labour leadership contest in which Jeremy Corbyn defeated several female rivals—Yvonne Roberts expressed her disappointment by recalling the General Election, in which she noted that women had “changed the debate not just because of what they said, but *how* they said it and the way in which they related to each other and the electorate—a visibly different kind of politics” (“Yet again men hold power”, *Guardian* 20 September, 2015).

The association of women with “a visibly different kind of politics” has been observed in other contexts. In Finland, for example, Mäkelä, Isotalus and Ruoho (2015) analysed the press’s treatment of Jutta Urpilainen, a candidate for the leadership of the Social Democratic Party in 2008, finding that her femaleness was often presented as an asset in and of itself: at a time when her party was felt to be in need of modernization, the idea of a woman leader, someone outside the traditionally male political establishment, symbolized a commitment to progressive change. In the very different context of the US Republican Party, it has been suggested that the same symbolic equation of femaleness with outsider status was one element in the meteoric rise of Sarah Palin (Davies 2015; Meeks 2013). In GE2015 coverage there was evidence of a similar symbolism. “The women” were portrayed as an alternative to conventional politics by virtue of their status as outsiders to the “the Westminster boys’ club”. But this rhetoric of difference sometimes veered into the territory of patronizing stereotypes, suggesting that women were by nature too nice, or too sensible, to want to join the club. This idea was articulated particularly clearly in an *Express* column by Richard Madeley (“The best PMs we never had”, 2 May): “Sadly”, he wrote, “top quality ladies are not often attracted to the dirty, nasty old political game. They are not greedy or vicious enough and know there's more to life than climbing a greasy pole”. This piece argued (and was not the only one to do so) that the male party leaders’ wives might have made better leaders than their husbands, had they not, as women, had more important things to do with their lives.

As Mäkelä et al. (2015) point out, the discourse in which women’s difference is presented as a political asset typically coexists with more traditional discourses in which it is figured as a deficiency, connoting a lack of ambition or toughness. The result is a variation on the classic double bind, in which the message to women is “be different—but not too different”. Women must still demonstrate that they are “man enough” to do the job, but they are also expected to be sufficiently distinct from men to fulfil their function as symbols of “a visibly different kind of politics”. A discourse that values women for their difference, just like one that derides them for it, treats female politicians as representatives of their gender. In that respect it is arguably no more progressive than what preceded it: women are still obliged to negotiate contradictory expectations, and they continue to

be judged by standards that are not applied to their male counterparts. In the next section we will look more closely at how this worked in the case of one of the GE2015 women, Nicola Sturgeon.

#### **4. The gendering of Nicola Sturgeon**

The press coverage discussed in the last section, focusing on “the women” as a collective entity, was not the only kind the female party leaders received: each of them also featured in commentary that represented them as individual actors. Among the three, it was Nicola Sturgeon who attracted the most individual attention (on Loughborough University’s list of the individuals who featured most prominently in campaign coverage she was the top-ranked woman and the fifth-ranked person). In addition to being extensive, commentary on Sturgeon was strikingly polarized: most of it was either extremely positive or extremely negative, with little in between.

As Higgins and McKay (2016) show in their longitudinal analysis of the Scottish press’s coverage of Nicola Sturgeon’s career from 2004, this polarization has a longer history. In Scotland it is apparent in the media’s construction of two contrasting gendered personae for Sturgeon: one which emphasizes her combative or “abrasive” qualities (exemplified in the media’s use of the nicknames “Gnasher”, the name of a semi-feral dog in a children’s comic, and “Nippy sweetie”, meaning a sour-tasting sweet), and another which presents her as a more conventional “everywoman” (exemplified in interviews dwelling on, for instance, her domestic arrangements and her weakness for buying shoes). While the second of these personae has become more salient over time, the first has remained in play, and may be used either to comment positively on how Sturgeon has grown into her role, or to imply, more negatively, that the “real” Sturgeon is still “nippy” but has learned how to soften her public image. Though our corpus of GE2015 press coverage did not employ exactly the same tropes which have become familiar to Scottish audiences, it did make use of a comparable contrast between two female archetypes—one characterized by positive and “relatable” feminine qualities (such as empathy, warmth, common sense and “feistiness”), and another which casts powerful women as cold, domineering and sexually predatory.

The main theme of the commentary that appeared immediately after the first TV debate was how impressively Sturgeon had performed (“Sturgeon star of the show”, *Sun*, 3 April) and how well her performance had been received (“Can I vote for the SNP, voters ask”, *Independent*, 3 April). But on April 4 the *Mail* ran an article headed “Is this the most dangerous woman in Britain?” which was followed by a steady increase in negative coverage. On 5 April the *Sunday Express* produced one of several items (“The truth behind SNP ‘cult’ leader Nicola Sturgeon”) suggesting that Sturgeon’s warm and empathetic public image masked a controlling and autocratic personality. As the campaign progressed, the use of old-fashioned sexist tropes became more pronounced. The idea of Sturgeon as a puppet master with Ed Miliband as her puppet, first introduced by the Conservative Party in its campaign advertising, was taken up enthusiastically; a variation on this theme portrayed Sturgeon as an overbearing wife and Miliband as her henpecked husband. She was also represented, both visually and verbally, as an archetypal seductress, using her sex to gain power over men, and ultimately to destroy them. “She’ll charm you”, said a headline in the *Telegraph* (April 2), “but don’t fall for the siren of the SNP”. Or as the *Sun* put it (“Sisterhood politics won’t be ladylike”, April 20), “Nicola Sturgeon may wear high heels and a skirt, but the eerie silence from noisy ex-leader Alex Salmond proves she eats her partners alive”.

This negative portrayal of Sturgeon was at odds with the alternative discourse in which “the women” represented a fresh, modern style of politics, and for some commentators its casual sexism seemed like a throwback to the 1970s. But as Ross (2015) argued, this is probably better understood as a tactical deployment of sexism as a weapon. Though it was only possible because the target was a woman, what motivated the attack was not Sturgeon’s sex per se, it was the recognition of her as a powerful adversary who posed a genuine political threat. The right-wing press feared that if the election did not produce a clear Conservative majority the outcome might be a Labour-SNP coalition government; conversely, some parts of the centre-left press feared (justifiably, as it turned out) that a swing to the SNP in Scotland would damage Labour and hand victory to the Conservatives. It was only in relation to Sturgeon that the “different voice” discourse was overridden by more overtly sexist representations, because Sturgeon was the only one of the women whose performance had the

potential to affect the election's outcome, and the only one whose political skills caused the other parties any concern. We might wonder, in fact, whether the popularity of positive discourse on women's "different voice" is covertly predicated on the relative marginality of the women concerned. Deploying that discourse to praise peripheral figures like Wood and Bennett is an easy way to display "modern", progressive attitudes; but when the political stakes are higher it is easily abandoned.

One thing that clearly worried Sturgeon's critics in the media was the enthusiastic public reception of her performance in the first TV debate. But the increasingly negative press coverage seems to have had little effect on her popularity. A later poll which asked 1200 respondents for their opinions of the party leaders found that Sturgeon had by far the highest positive approval rating: her nearest rival, Nigel Farage, was more than twenty points behind her (TNS Global 2015). The basis for these judgments was probed further in a series of focus group discussions conducted for the Qualitative Election Survey of Britain (Winters and Carvalho 2015). The researchers reported that leaders' performances were assessed on two main dimensions, which they labelled "articulacy" and "authenticity". Judgments of "articulacy" related to a leader's perceived ability to make clear, strong and well-reasoned arguments (which was positively evaluated even where people did not agree with the arguments themselves); judgments of "authenticity" related to a leader's perceived honesty, sincerity and lack of artifice (again, these qualities were seen as positive even by people who disliked the leader concerned). In the focus groups as in the poll, Sturgeon and Farage ranked above the other leaders because they were perceived as both articulate and authentic (whereas the other men were seen as articulate but not authentic, and the other women as authentic but not articulate). Sturgeon was praised for speaking straightforwardly and from personal conviction: the words "strong" and "passionate" recurred in group-members' comments on her.

These focus group findings, along with the findings of our analysis of the leaders' actual performances in the two debates, suggest that the positive reception of Nicola Sturgeon by audiences had little to do with either her own performance of gender or the way gender figured in media discourse about her performance. As we noted earlier, Sturgeon's debate performances would not be most accurately described as displays of "empathy, understanding and cooperation": though she did

exhibit those qualities on occasion (as did other leaders, male and female), what she really stood out for was her mastery of the traditional art of political debate. Of all the leaders who participated, Sturgeon was the most consistent and most effective exponent of the adversarial style. She was the leader who recorded the highest frequency of interruptions, the majority of which were direct challenges to the previous speaker; she also used asides and humorous comments to goad or mock opponents, most notably Farage and Ed Miliband. (If she did not use these tactics against Wood and Bennett, that was arguably less a case of sisterly supportiveness than a matter of political calculation: since all three female-led parties were promoting similar anti-austerity policies, and since they were not in competition for the same Parliamentary seats, they had nothing to gain by attacking each other.) Farage used similar strategies, but he managed them less skilfully. He frequently intervened to take the floor, but unlike Sturgeon he was often unable to keep it; whereas his displays of anger tended to involve blustering and shouting, her anger was more controlled, and in many cases tempered with humour. The focus groups' assessment of Sturgeon as "strong and passionate", and their perception that she had something in common with Farage, despite the political gulf between them, suggests that these viewers may have been more attuned to the details of the leaders' behaviour—and less insistent on judging their performances in gendered terms—than the media commentators who either lumped Sturgeon together with "the women" in order to praise her, or else used sexist tropes to condemn her.

## **5. Conclusion: dilemmas of difference**

In media commentary on GE2015, the notion of women's "different voice" provided the basis for what might appear to be an unusually positive representation of female politicians. Though the sexist tropes described in previous scholarship did appear, particularly in some commentary on Nicola Sturgeon as an individual, they coexisted with a discourse in which women were credited with modelling a new style of political communication that was not only different from men's, but also preferable to it—more modern, more democratic, more "authentic".

As we suggested in the introduction, however, this positive discourse is not without its problems. One problem is that it constructs an idealized female speaker who does not, in reality, exist. Though women politicians often say in interviews or surveys that their communication style is less aggressive and competitive than men's, these self-reports are not necessarily an accurate reflection of their behaviour. The findings of empirical studies of naturally-occurring political speech (e.g. Adams 2015, Banwart and McKinney 2005, Cameron and Shaw 2016, Shaw 2006), do not support the belief that female politicians in general favour a speech style characterized by “empathy, understanding and cooperation”, nor do they show that women are less able than men to make use of adversarial strategies. These are folklinguistic myths: in fact, they are a context-specific variant of what Cameron (2007) dubs “the myth of Mars and Venus”. In our view, the cause of sex equality in politics is not advanced either by representing women politicians as more different from men than they really are, or by treating them as a homogeneous mass whose behaviour is understood to be deeply influenced by what they share—their gender—yet apparently unaffected by the many other characteristics that differentiate them (e.g. age, class, ethnicity, political allegiance and experience).

The rise of political commentary praising women's “different voice” shows that gendered mediation can change its form, but merely shifting from negative to positive terms does not eliminate the basic problem: while men in politics are evaluated as individuals, female politicians continue to be judged as representatives of their gender. We have no quarrel with the argument that women should not have to behave like men to be treated as men's equals. But nor should they be required to behave differently from men for their political contributions to be recognized and valued.

## Notes

1. Both the name and the composition of The Independent Group have changed since its formation. It initially registered as a political party under the name “Change UK”, but this was modified, following a dispute with the online petition platform Change.org, to “The Independent Group for Change” (IGC). Five of the defecting MPs continued to operate under



that label until Parliament was dissolved in preparation for a General Election (to be held on December 12—still a month away at the time of writing), but by that point all but one of the remaining six had joined the Liberal Democrats. In the 2019 General Election only three of the original eleven will stand as IGC candidates; four will fight the election as Liberal Democrats, one will contest his former seat as an unaffiliated Independent, and the remaining three will not seek re-election.

2. GE2015 was only the second UK campaign to feature televised debates among party leaders, and the inclusion of several smaller parties (UKIP, the Greens, Plaid Cymru and the SNP, none of which at the time had significant representation at Westminster) was a new departure: the first leaders' debates, held in 2010, had featured only the leaders of the traditional "big three" parties (i.e., the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats). However, the 2010 election had produced a Parliament in which no party had an overall majority, and GE2015 was widely expected to be another close contest in which smaller parties, particularly UKIP, might make significant gains. That was seen as a strong argument for including more than three party leaders in the debates, and it was decided that seven would participate (the inclusion of only five in the second debate resulted from David Cameron's refusal to take part in more than one, which also led to the exclusion of his deputy and coalition partner Nick Clegg). However, predictions that the result would be close turned out to be mistaken. The Conservatives gained an overall majority, while the Liberal Democrats suffered catastrophic losses. UKIP also lost heavily: though it took 12.6% of the national vote, under the first-past-the-post system it was unable to win any of the seats it contested. The SNP, on the other hand, though it took only 4.7% of the national vote, virtually swept the board in Scotland, increasing its representation at Westminster from 6 to 56 seats and becoming the third largest party after the Conservatives and Labour.

3. The individual differences referred to here are most readily explained in terms of two factors other than gender. One is experience: the leaders who had experience of participating regularly in highly adversarial set-piece events like Prime Minister's or Scottish First Minister's Questions (Cameron, Miliband, Sturgeon) were able to perform more effectively in the TV debate setting than those who had less experience (the least experienced speaker, Natalie Bennett, was an outlier on every measure we looked at). The other factor was the status of a leader's party. Though all leaders were allocated the same amount of time for prepared statements, during "free-flowing" segments they were not all treated equally: as leaders of the two largest parties, and therefore prime ministerial contenders, Cameron and Miliband were more frequently nominated to speak by the debate moderators and to some extent by other participants. They took fewer uninvited turns than Farage or Sturgeon because their privileged access to invited turns reduced the need for them to compete for the floor.
  
4. Our analysis is based on a sample of newspaper articles retrieved using the database Lexis UK. The parameters of the search were set to retrieve all items which (a) appeared in a UK newspaper with a nationwide circulation, (b) were published between March 31 (the day after Parliament was dissolved) and May 8 (the day after the election), and (c) mentioned any of the three female party leaders by name in any part of the text. This procedure returned 373 items, which were then read closely to exclude duplicates (or variants that had appeared in different editions of the same newspaper) along with pieces which were not concerned with GE2015. This procedure left a total of 219 items for analysis. The sample included material both from the major London-based national daily newspapers—the *Times*, *Telegraph*, the *Independent* and its 'concise' stable-mate the *i*, the *Guardian*, *Express*, *Mail*, *Mirror*, *Sun* and *Star*—and from the associated Sunday titles (*Observer*, *Sunday Express*, *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Independent on Sunday*, *Mail on Sunday*); and since we wanted to investigate the range of representations encountered by readers of a newspaper's election

coverage, the items sampled were not limited to news reports, but also included features of various kinds, regular columns, sketches, opinion pieces and editorials.

5. Editorially, the majority of the titles in our sample supported the Conservatives (with the *Express* also showing some sympathy for UKIP, to which its proprietor was a major donor). The *Independent* came out in favour of a renewed Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition, while its Sunday sister-paper declined to endorse any party. The *Guardian*, its Sunday sister-title *The Observer* and the *Mirror* supported Labour.

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This article draws on the findings of a previous collaboration between the authors: a case study of the language used by and about women party leaders in the 2015 UK General Election campaign, which is published as *Gender, Power and Political Speech* (Palgrave-Macmillan 2016).