WOMEN PLAYERS: 
THE GAME FRAME IN THE 1999 
GENERAL ELECTION 

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INTRODUCTION

The 1999 General Election was the first in New Zealand history to feature two women as leading contenders for the role of Prime Minister. The unique event caught the public and media imagination, and Jenny Shipley and Helen Clark were variously depicted as Xena warriors and adversaries putting aside political feeling to enjoy a Chit Chat biscuit together. Reporters were primed for a campaign “catfight” but appeared disappointed at the women’s good behaviour and “stage managed” campaigns. While one political commentator concluded that the media was unmoved by the remarkable nature of the race (James, 1999), another claimed that women dominated the news, added a new dimension to the campaign, and “altered its character fundamentally” (Harris, 2000, p.77).

As well as being historically significant, the campaign coverage was fascinating to observe. The two women leaders had very different styles, and as the campaign developed, Clark clearly emerged in the media as the likely winner. For researchers interested in the media campaign, the 1999 General Election offers a unique opportunity to explore how the gender of leaders impacts upon conventional ways of framing political news during an election campaign. Thus, this paper explores newspaper coverage of the women’s leadership during the campaign, with reference to framing theory and in particular the well-established political news frame known as the strategy or “game” frame. Were there any substantive changes to this dominant way of covering political leadership, that reflected on the leaders’ gender? This question is important in light of research suggesting women politicians are disadvantaged by the application of dominant – and apparently masculine – political news frames (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999).

FRAMING POLITICAL NEWS

Media frames are used to structure news texts, and provide reporters (and therefore readers) with a way of making sense of events and issues. Tankard, with others,
defines a frame as “a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (quoted in Tankard, 2001, pp.100-101). A news frame works in much the same way as a frame placed around a picture, highlighting one aspect of a larger view, limiting what is seen, and suggesting a certain tone (Tankard, 2001). A news frame can also be said to act like a frame for a building, providing a structure around which everything else is arranged (ibid.)

Cappella and Jamieson (1997), drawing on the work of Jamieson (1992) and Patterson (1994), identify three main ways of framing political news: a strategy or “game” frame, an issue and a mixed frame. The game frame is characterised by five inter-related themes: winning and losing; language of war, games and competition; emphasis on performers, critics and audience; focus on performance, style and perception of candidates; and heavy weighing of polls and candidates’ standing (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). The often criticized “horse race” approach to reporting political news is one aspect of the strategy or game frame (Patterson, 1994). Of the three main political news frames, the strategy frame is increasingly dominant, and is the focus of this paper.

International research by Norris (1997) has shown that gender influences the framing of media coverage women leaders receive when first rising to power. Norris (1997) identifies three gendered news frames common in the reporting of women leaders – the leadership breakthrough for women, women leaders as outsiders, and women leaders as agents of change. The “first woman” frame was widely applied to New Zealand’s first female Prime Minister, Jenny Shipley, particularly in the early days of her leadership but also at various other times throughout her term (e.g. Edwards, 1997). Other framing research suggests that women seeking political power may be disadvantaged by the application of traditional news frames. For example, Gidengil and Everitt (1999) used the concept of gendered mediation to analyse the 1993 Canadian leaders’ debates. They argued that political news, with its metaphors of war and conflict, subtly reinforced politics as a male arena, and thus created particular challenges for women leaders. In other words, the women who took part in the 1993 leaders’ debates ran the risk that their behaviour, if contrary to expectations of how women should behave, would be interpreted negatively.
Gidengil and Everitt’s findings demonstrate “that what is perceived – positively – to be combative in a man may be judged – negatively – to be aggressive in a woman” (p.62).

This paper considers media coverage of Shipley and Clark during the election campaign in relation to the established characteristics of the game frame (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). In particular, it asks if and how these characteristics were modified to reflect the gender of the leaders.

**WINNING AND LOSING ARE CENTRAL**

One of the most pervasive features of the strategy frame is the centrality of winning and losing, which is both a category of its own and an aspect of all other characteristics of the frame (particularly polling, and war and sporting language). The media’s preoccupation with who is winning is often referred to as the “horse race” approach to political journalism (e.g. Patterson, 1994; McGregor, Comrie & Fountaine, 1999). While the horse race is particularly common in “First Past the Post” (FPP) style politics, our new Mixed Member Proportional system offers at least as many opportunities for “calling the race”: in individual electorates and with regard to levels of party support, preferred Prime Minister and centre left/centre right coalition numbers. Winning and losing are also important concepts in the media’s analysis of leaders’ debates (Jamieson, 1992).

In 1999, early campaign coverage was focused on speculation about the likely impact of the All Blacks’ Rugby World Cup loss on the election outcome. Sporting analogies are not uncommon in the reporting of politics, and are in themselves a component of the strategic frame (see the following section). In New Zealand, rugby is regarded as the “national game” and according to the Rugby Football Union is an integral part of our culture and identity. Thus, it is unsurprising that research by Adrian Orr has examined whether there is a correlation between All Black losses and incumbent governments losing elections (there is; see Bain, 1999), and that this research would resurface when the Rugby World Cup coincided with an election campaign. Thus, the loss was interpreted as a prediction of loss for National and
victory for the political left, particularly as the incumbent government had aligned itself with the team:

National’s campaign had incorporated the expected feel-good factor from an All Black win: Apec leaders’ outfits were styled on an “Awe Black” theme, the November 27 election has been alleged to be timed to coincide with the World Cup, and Mrs Shipley publicly farewelled the team and has frequently worn a silver fern brooch (Bain, 1999, p2).

However, Shipley continued to support the team, attending an airport gathering to welcome the players back, and drawing her own conclusions about what the loss meant for National by stating, in a widely reported comment, that the favourite does not always win. The New Zealand Herald of November 4 depicted Shipley on the telephone to Pierre Villepreux, seeking advice from France’s assistant rugby coach on how to beat the favourites, and saying (in a reference to the All Blacks’ accusation that the French had resorted to testicle-grabbing during the game), “…bite them and grab them by their what? Mister Villepreux?!?”

The cartoons of the time contained various other rugby images and references. Another cartoon, also in the New Zealand Herald (on November 6), showed a perspiring Shipley, dressed in an All Black uniform, running to kick a rugby ball labeled “employment figures”. Depicting Shipley and other National MPs as All Blacks associated them with loss, a sentiment continued in a widely published Tremain cartoon which showed Shipley saying to her presumably desperate Finance Minister Bill English, “It’s a brilliant idea, Bill…but I’m not sure [resigning All Black coach] John Hart would want to coach Labour”. Finally, on November 10, The Dominion’s editorial cartoon had the All Black captain receiving a welcome kiss from the Shipley, while a strategist rushed towards her, yelling “No, no, no, Jenny! Only if he was a winning skipper remember?” This not only continued the association of Shipley with loss but also alluded to her tendency to make mistakes under pressure.

Shipley as a rugby-playing figure appeared to have two dimensions – one, an allusion to her size (Shipley has been described in terms of her physical invincibility, as a “prop forward” and “armoured personnel carrier”, according to McGregor, 1996, p.181); the other as a more positive image of her perceived “ordinariness” and
“common touch” (Dore, 1999, p.13). This contrasts her with “Opera-loving Labour leader Helen Clark” (Main, 1999, p.2) who is widely described as enjoying more cerebral activities and who indicated her desire to be Arts minister during the election campaign. While Shipley’s ordinariness and common touch (Dore, 1999) and her one-of-us identity with ordinary families (James, 1999) were regarded as her greatest strengths, Clark’s greatest weaknesses were seen to be her reserve, intelligence, and passion for elite and solitary recreations such as opera and cross-country skiing (ibid.)

**LANGUAGE OF WAR, GAMES AND COMPETITION**

There are various examples of the language of war, games and sport being applied to politics and the leaders in particular. As well as the rugby linkages explored above, there was on-going reference to the two women leaders as Xena princesses or warriors (in fact *The Dominion* used a cartoon of the two women fighting in Xena-like costumes on several occasions), particularly after Labour Party President Bob Harvey made this analogy, saying “We’re interested in a male country, which we are, in seeing two women battle it out – the two Xena princesses. That’s what it’s about. It’s the combat” (Venter, 1999, p.2).

An examination of election campaign coverage shows the traditional (and masculine) sports- and military-inspired language of politics did not change because of the presence of two women leaders. For example, in an article headlined “Shipley, Clark even; Anderton wins”, Helen Bain (1999a) drew on boxing metaphors when she wrote,

> When it came down to a direct contest between the two women who could lead the next government, Mrs Shipley and Miss Clark were about even on points, and neither scored a knockout blow. (p.3)

Other examples of war imagery included:

Labour leader Helen Clark ventured into enemy territory yesterday, trawling for votes in an area which most rejected her party in 1996 (Peters, 1999, p.2).

National wants to widen police powers so officers can force suspected burglars to give DNA samples. Prime Minister Jenny Shipley’s announcement has heated up the pre-election law and order bidding war… (Wellwood, 1999, p.1).
Prime Minister Jenny Shipley stayed calm under fire last night as she met the Green Party threat head on at a feisty meeting in the Coromandel electorate (Beston, 1999, p.1).

The explicit addition of gender to the war imagery trivialized the confrontation between the two leaders as a “catfight”. On November 14, the *Sunday News* published a front-page story headlined “Holmes: I didn’t stage a catfight” (p.1). In it, broadcaster (and media adviser to Helen Clark) Brian Edwards apologised after saying on his radio programme that he had heard members of the Holmes leaders’ debate team expressed regret that the women had not engaged in more of a catfight. Host Paul Holmes called Edwards’ statement outrageous, demeaning to both women and offensive to everyone. Shipley responded by saying that some people would have loved a catfight but “We should be able to form conclusions rather than have the gladiatorial type of contest” (p.1). Clark’s response, also reported in the *Sunday News*, was that “I’m not going to buy into pressure to mount an underarm bowling attack” (p.1). Earlier in the campaign, Main (1999a) too drew on the catfight analogy when she wrote, in relation to the first leaders’ debate, that “Clark kept her claws in, opting to avoid the catfight expected of the two women leaders” (p.2). However, despite (or perhaps because of) media priming, Clark and Shipley’s behaviour throughout the campaign suggested both women were committed to refraining from actions that could be interpreted as a catfight.

**STORY WITH PERFORMERS, CRITICS AND AUDIENCE**

The strategic framing of election campaigns results in story or play-like narratives, complete with performers, critics and an audience (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). This tendency, along with other aspects of the game frame, has raised concerns about voter apathy as they are treated as spectators (i.e. the audience) rather than active participants in the political process. The 1999 election campaign was played out in a series of roadshows, starring the women leaders. In particular, National’s campaign trail featured Shipley and her husband, as well as the almost constant presence of protestors. For example, a *Dominion* story about Shipley’s visit to Dunedin begins,

Prime Minister Jenny Shipley was ambushed by protesting students in the Labour territory of Dunedin yesterday, with scuffles and shouting matches breaking out…Mrs Shipley’s husband Burton engaged in loud arguments
with a couple of the protestors, who numbered about eight but were vocal, and shadowed Mrs Shipley’s entire visit. (Scuffle as students ambush Shipley, 1999, p.2)

The political spouse as a campaign performer is a relatively new phenomenon in New Zealand. Bain (1999b) describes Burton Shipley as “ubiquitous”, and writes,

The media spotlight has become a more frequent intrusion into the lives of political spouses. Though they have always been hard workers behind the scenes, they are finding themselves on the campaign stage more often. (p.19)

While Jenny Shipley deliberately included him in her campaigning, another perspective on the level of media interest is that husbands of female political candidates are scrutinised because they are assumed to be manipulating and advising their wives (Witt, Paget & Matthews, 1994). What is not noted in Bain’s account of the rise of the political spouse is the possible gendered dimension to this development, and it is an extension of the attention to the maternal and familial status of the two women leaders. Clark was seldom accompanied by her husband, in keeping with her belief that family and politics should be kept separate. On the other hand, Burton Shipley was a popular figure, but this popularity could only occur because of his continued presence at the side of the Prime Minister. However, it should be noted that in the 2002 General Election, Shipley’s male successor Bill English also used this tactic, often accompanied on the campaign trail by his much-admired wife, Doctor Mary English.

The leadership debates are a clear forum where political “performers” meet the audience and critics. The idea that women’s aggressive behaviour is overplayed in media comment about leadership debates (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999) is not supported in analysis of the 1999 general election. In fact, the opposite seemed to occur, with, for example, one commentator commending Shipley’s uncompromising approach, and awarding “an aggressive Mrs Shipley the first half of the debate and an assured Miss Clark the second” (Leaders neck and neck, 1999, p.1). If anything, it appeared commentators and the media were disappointed that the women had been so well behaved. They were looking for more “fight” from the women leaders, who were seen to be overshadowed by the men in the earlier debates (e.g. Bain, 1999a). This reading of the situation is supported by a cartoon, published on November 24 by the Evening Post, depicting three male meat-workers discussing the leaders’ debate.
The first said, “Did you catch the sheilas on the box?” The second responded with his verdict: “I thought both Jenny and Helen were well groomed, well prepared, moderate, intelligent and articulate…” The third said, “So that’s what politics has sunk to in this country” (p.4). The *Otago Daily Times* also noted the good behaviour of the leaders, writing,

They sometimes talked over each other during a well-behaved, hour-long Holmes show but did not get much beyond the occasional “that’s rubbish” as they dealt with the economy, taxation, labour relations and education. (Honours about even as two leaders go head-to-head, 1999, p.12)

Newspapers also used traditional “horse race” and other sporting analogies in coverage of the leaders’ debates. For example, *The Dominion* reported that the women leaders were overall neck and neck but Clark was “a nose” in front (Leaders neck and neck, 1999, p.1). On 24 November the *New Zealand Herald* headlined its front-page story “Clark a clear winner on points” and explained, “John Roughan reports from the ringside as the heavyweights slug it out. It’s always a prize fight, even when the combatants are the first women to go head to head for the prime ministership of New Zealand” (p.1). The article summarised the debate, round by round, and concluded:

Referee Paul Holmes wound things up with some personal jabs of his own. Was Helen Clark, childless, able to understand the concerns of parents? She had probably been prepared for this punch from the start of the campaign and delivered a powerful homily on her own family relationships. The jab to Mrs Shipley was rather softer. Did her background enable her to understand Maori? She reminded him of her performance at Waitangi this year. All in all, a decisive win on points to Helen Clark (Roughan, 1999, p.1).

**Heavy weighing of polls and candidates’ standings**

Polls indicating levels of party, candidate and leader support were reported throughout the campaign. Patterson (1994) writes that “The press relies on polls to maintain a running tally on the game” (p.81). Thus, polling is an important element of the game or strategy framing of political news.

According to Jamieson (1992), “Polling data often provide the trip wire that activates the discussion of strategy in news” (p.175). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the results of both party support and preferred prime minister polls impacted upon the
coverage of Clark and Shipley’s strategy. The fact that Clark reached a two-year high in support, and overtook Shipley as preferred prime minister during the campaign contributed to her emergence, in the latter days of the campaign, as Prime Minister in waiting. Clark’s plans for her first 100 days in office were widely reported in the latter days of the campaign. Clark’s portrayal of herself as Prime Minister in waiting was accepted and given credence by a news media confident of a centre-left victory. For example, by November 26, a speech by Clark was—according to the *Waikato Times*—sounding like the final touch to a winning campaign (Beston, 1999a). Reporting on Clark and Anderton’s plans to meet in Wellington the day after the election, the *Evening Post* proclaimed, “Clark all set to form new government” (p.1). Consistent with Jamieson’s (1992) belief that candidates’ status in the polls contributes to language choice, Clark was described as “supremely confident” while a “defiant” Shipley was seen to be merely “going through the motions” (Clark all set to form new government, 1999, p.1).

Similarly, in the *New Zealand Herald*, political reporter Bernard Orsman credited Shipley with the Greens’ surge in poll support, writing that “Jenny Shipley’s ‘reefer madness’ leaves National feeling cold turkey and the Greens on a high with up to eight MPs…” (Who’s going to win tomorrow?, 1999, p.5). The *Evening Post* also attributed the rise in support for the Greens to National tactics, writing that “They’ve come from almost nowhere, courtesy of National’s clumsy attacks last week” (Clark all set to form new government, 1999, p.1). In a post-election analysis, James (2000) described the way Shipley’s attack on the Greens was received by the media and the public:

This not only was a blunder (it activated dormant Green votes), it was also portrayed in the media as a blunder. Labour focus groups immediately began to recall her earlier political ineptness and ACT also recorded a negative reaction. It highlighted a contrast between a blundering Shipley and a careful, sure-footed and increasingly “prime ministerial” Helen Clark, which worked to Labour’s advantage, as evidenced in polls in the following few days (p.76).

Patterson’s (1994) comments can be used to explain why Shipley’s campaign poll results would not allow her strategy to be favourably evaluated. He writes:

The issues, the images, the tactical adjustments – all of these factors at some point must make sense in terms of the race. A reporter cannot routinely say that the candidate who is in second place has the better strategy; to do so is to
invite a complex explanation that might not be persuasive and that would call into question the reporter’s objectivity (p.97).

Gender theorists have often bemoaned the preoccupation with the horse race, in light of research showing women receive more negative viability coverage and are thus more likely to be evaluated negatively (Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991). However, the New Zealand campaign – centred on two women – did not fit the mould of “viable male” against “non-viable female”. Instead, poll stories and the resulting strategic coverage presented voters with a choice between an apparently viable woman and a non-viable incumbent Prime Minister.

**Centrality of performance, style and perception of candidates**

The focus on candidates’ performance and style rather than issues is another characteristic of the game frame. Patterson (1994) writes that “In the journalists’ eyes, the campaign at times boils down to little more than a personal fight between the candidates” (p.63). During an election campaign, the leaders’ performances are heavily scrutinised, particularly as New Zealand campaigns have become more presidential in style, and because of the perceived relationship between preferred Prime Minister polling and party vote.

Shipley’s performance as Prime Minister had been under scrutiny for several months before the election campaign. The media had noted her tendency to make off-the-cuff comments when under pressure, her accident-prone behaviour and erratic leadership, and raised questions about her credibility. Against this background, it is not surprising that Shipley’s election campaign performance was often criticised. Shipley’s performance was scrutinised to a greater extent than Clark’s, which may be indicative of anti-incumbency bias or a reflection of a genuinely less successful campaign, captured in consistently low polls. Throughout the campaign, the attention to polling kept viability issues at the forefront for both women leaders – particularly Shipley. The theme of political misjudgement was apparent in coverage of Shipley and English’s views on the likelihood of tax cuts, with one reporter advising, “Here’s how not to run a press conference…” (Edwards, 1999, p.2). Shipley’s earlier difficulties haunted her throughout the campaign. When Shipley was quoted as
saying that her children had named the campaign bus “Lipstick one”, the New Zealand Herald suggested “the obvious conclusion is that she wants that to catch on before Blunderbus does” (Putting on the gloss, 1999, p.1). There were also more implicit references to her reputation for making blunders, in comments – particularly about the leaders’ debates that she was too well rehearsed (e.g. Roughan, 1999, p.1), well prepared and slick (Bain, 1999a). Even when Shipley performed well, comments were double-edged. For example, political reporter Victoria Main wrote in the Dominion that “the notoriously accident-prone Mrs Shipley impressed many commentators with her poise” (Main, 1999a, p.2).

In the last days before the election, the media concluded – based on polling data – that Shipley’s approach of walking around, saying “Hi, I’m Jenny”, had not worked, and while she was expected to come out fighting, it was probably too late. The Evening Standard stated that Shipley’s serene performance had not been successful, and that she had not really taken the fight to Labour. Shipley’s style of campaigning was also criticised for being too insular, a criticism begun by Clark, which quickly gathered momentum and haunted her throughout the campaign. For example, two of a group of five articles published by the Otago Daily Times about Shipley’s visit to Dunedin, contained references to the Prime Minister defending and trying to shake off allegations about her removed approach to campaigning.

In contrast to Shipley, Clark enjoyed a well-established reputation for seldom making mistakes, although early in the campaign the New Zealand Herald suggested she had jeopardised this by letting herself be reported as wanting to halve unemployment, over-reacting to National’s family push, and by taking poetic licence in campaign advertising. Her cautious and careful image occasionally left her open to calls for greater risk taking and she was also criticised for lacking personality. For example, The Dominion said that while National was doing all it could to bring Shipley’s personality to the fore, Labour was doing its best to disguise the fact that Clark did not really have one.

While talk of blunders and cautious leadership will also occur with male candidates in similar ways to those described here, the women leaders did face a particular performance issue related to gender, that of physical appearance. For example, in an
article about the “strong feminine feel” to the campaign, Bain (1999c) judged the leaders partially on their visual impact, writing:

The difference appearance can make was apparent in Parliament’s adjournment debate last month. Mrs Shipley was radiant in a stunning new cobalt blue suit, while Miss Clark was drab in olive. Miss Clark’s speech was well focused, strong on content and confidently delivered, but it was the visual impression left by Mrs Shipley on the television news that was most striking (p.9).

Also during the campaign, Clark’s billboard picture was the subject of speculation about whether her image had been digitally enhanced. The Dominion appeared particularly interested in the appearance of the women leaders. On 6 November, it ran an article headlined “Clark’s mouth ‘really is hers’” (p.2), with two accompanying photographs captioned “Helen Clark billboard style, and in real life”. The unidentified reporter wrote,

During the past month, Miss Clark’s swept up, glamorous image has been the subject of gossip by political junkies. Is that really Helen? Who’s her hairdresser and how can I get an appointment? How did she get rid of the shadows under her eyes during an election campaign? When did she get her teeth done? (p.2)

When the party’s campaign manager maintained the photo was not digitally altered, and that the effect was achieved through lighting, The Dominion quoted a “Wellington design company employee with good industry links” (ibid.), who said the billboards had definitely been worked on. The article also claimed that Clark was not the only politician to have her image doctored; hordes of other politicians had also done so but only Shipley was mentioned as an example. Three days later The Dominion ran another appearance-based article, “Trying to look the part” (p.9). Reporter Helen Bain (1999c) argued the campaign was not all policies and promises; there was also interest in make-up and frocks, giving the campaign a strong feminine feel, and intensifying the focus on appearance. The Press also printed this article under the headline “The importance of keeping up appearances” (p.11), and with more photographs of the two leaders over the years.

While there appears to be a trend towards male leaders also receiving this type of scrutiny, the tone of coverage is different for men and women. For example, McNair (2000) says the extensive coverage of British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s hairstyle
“was tinged with humour and irreverance” (p.50), and was often used as a lead-in to analysis of voting patterns and performance. In New Zealand, newspapers adopted a critical approach to Clark’s doctored image, yet also published features about the importance of appearance for politicians (using women as examples), and condoning, for example, cobalt blue outfits over drab olive suits. The double bind women face becomes clear when Bain’s (1999c) comment about choice of dress is considered against The Dominion’s (and other newspapers’) implied criticism of women for appearing overly perfect in advertising images. It may also be considered in light of two Dominion articles, both on the same day, in which two different women political reporters (Victoria Main and Helen Bain) referred to the “dazzling smiles” of male politicians. Main (1999b) wrote that voters may think twice before falling for Peters’ dazzling smile, while Helen Bain (1999d) described Mauri Pacific candidate Api Malu as “he of the dazzling smile” (p.11). No questions were raised about the genuineness of these smiles, in contrast to the questions The Dominion posed about Clark’s teeth.

There was another aspect of performance and style which was even more clearly related to the gender of the women leaders. This was the issue of motherhood, and it is worthy of further exploration in the following section. Motherhood was part of Shipley’s style of campaigning, and it impacted upon the media coverage both she and Clark received.

“I’M A POLITICIAN, BUT I’M A MUM AS WELL”: THE MOTHERHOOD THEME IN STRATEGY COVERAGE

A particular noteworthy aspect of style and performance, and thus the strategy frame generally, was the motherhood dimension of the campaign, which – judging by the comments of reporters, commentators and members of the public – was a salient factor in the election coverage. Shipley appears to have deliberately highlighted her status as a mother, in an attempt to influence the media framing of her and Clark’s leadership styles.

Banducci (2002) suggests that the two main parties positioned themselves as “family friendly” rather than focusing on women’s issues: “Even though there is overlap
between family and women’s concerns, the symbolic rhetoric was focused on family issues rather than on gender equity issues” (p.51). However, Banducci’s comment understates the intersection of women’s political campaigning and family. Given that women candidates have traditionally based their political authority on familial status and duty (Wallace, 1992), there is more an “entwining” than an occasional “overlap” of concern.

As mentioned earlier, Shipley’s husband accompanied her throughout the campaign, and was thus often mentioned in media reports. In contrast, there were just two articles which mentioned Clark’s partner, Peter Davis, reflecting the much less public role taken on by him. The level of perceived public interest in the Shipleys’ marriage was indicated by a Sunday News story devoted to the relationship of the Prime Minister and her husband, headlined “Burton gets Jenny’s vote”, and beginning “No matter what happens in the election, prime minister Jenny Shipley is a winner in the love stakes” (p.4). Mrs Shipley, who appeared in an accompanying photograph with her husband, son and the family cats, told the newspaper her marriage continued to thrive despite the pressures of the job. Other mentions of family members occurred in stories on the women leaders’ backgrounds and lives, both of which mentioned their partners, and in Shipley’s case, her children.

The main references to Clark’s family were related to her childlessness. Several stories focused on her response to debate questioning about her decision not to have children, and another reported the Opposition leader’s attack on National for its attempts to look “caring and sharing” and promote family. On the other hand, references to Shipley’s children tended to be made by the Prime Minister herself. For example, she told reporters that her children had bestowed the name “Lipstick One” on her campaign bus, and in a leaders’ debate made a policy point in reference to her offspring, asking why middle class New Zealand should pay for her children to attend university.

The attention to family goes back to earlier in the year. In April and May of 1999, a “dirty campaign” was predicted by both Labour and National, with gender as one component of this. For example, a National Cabinet minister told a division conference that Labour was working on “the dirtiest campaign for many years”
which he predicted would focus on personal denigration of Shipley (Brockett, 1999, p.2). In response, Clark said there was evidence National was attempting to denigrate her on the basis of childlessness (ibid.), an attempt she labeled “dirty pool” in a current affairs programme which screened in May 1999. A copy of a National Party memo was leaked to the media in May 1999, in which the Party’s Woman’s Vice-President Sue MacKenzie suggested contrasting Shipley’s mother role with Clark’s lack of children, and encouraging Party members to question her health and appearance (Bain, 1999e, p.2). This strategy had been foreshadowed earlier in the year, when Shipley stressed, in a key speech, that she was a mother – a move interpreted as her way of showing the public she identified with the “hopes and concerns of ordinary families” (Clark mum over jibes, 1999, p.2) but also interpreted as a veiled attempt to portray Clark as remote (ibid.).

In fact, the motherhood image had been adopted by Shipley since early on in her term as Prime Minister, when she began the evolution from “the toughest man in Cabinet” (Dyer, 1997, p.6), into a mother figure. It is likely that Shipley positioned herself as a mother at least partially to soften her personal image and attract women voters to National. In traditional gender terms, Shipley’s one advantage over Clark (whose party was more popular with women voters in the 1996 election) was her status as a mother. After six months of Shipley’s leadership, the Evening Post’s political editor observed the strategic nature of Shipley’s references to family, writing that she

…has no qualms about using her family to promote her political ideals. Shipley’s speeches are liberally laced with anecdotes of her life as a mother and wife. Partly, it’s because family is important to Shipley. Partly, it’s politics. Shipley, the country’s first woman Prime Minister, has managed to undermine much of the support Clark enjoyed as a woman leader. And Shipley has one advantage over Clark. She has children; Clark does not (Edwards, 1998, p.5).

By late 1999, it was noted that Shipley “has managed to recast herself as a warm and possibly tough but ultimately caring mother. Her greatest asset is her ordinariness, her common touch” (Dore, 1999, p.13). In National’s election campaign advertising, Shipley referred to her role as a mother when she spoke about the party’s education policy, saying “I am a politician, but I am a mum as well. I have the same hopes and concerns for my children as other parents do” (Shipley’s ‘mum’ angle misjudged,
says Clark, 1999, p.1). Church (2000) notes the issue of motherhood was an implicit comparison running though the campaign. Shipley, he said,

…oozed maternal pride as she talked about the strengths of the nation, was seen sipping lattes with her husband and children in a picture of familial bliss usually confined to the fantasy world of advertisers, and made frequent reference to “families” in framing the policies of her government (p.107).

And in an article in The Australian, entitled “Mother of a challenge”, Christopher Dore agrees that Shipley’s approach was far from subtle:

Jenny Shipley, so the slick election ad begins, is the mother of Ben and Anna, a wife and the New Zealand Prime Minister. She is all those things, of course. The first woman to lead the country, in fact. But voters going to the polls tomorrow know this already – they’ve been told repeatedly since Shipley took over the job two years ago – and husband Burton and the children have all taken prominent public roles to reinforce the point. It’s hardly subtle, but the real aim of the television ad is to remind New Zealanders that the woman hoping to end Shipley’s rein as prime minister, Helen Clark, is not a mother. The underlying message of the National Party campaign is that Clark could not possibly understand traditional family values because she hasn’t got a family. How can she run the great New Zealand family, so the argument goes, if she has never run her own? This theme is at the heart of the personal contest between the National Party’s tough but motherly Shipley and Labour’s cold and scholarly Clark. “It’s mother of a nation vs – at best – favourite aunty of a nation,” says former Alliance MP Pam Corkery (Dore, 1999, p.13).

Comparisons on the basis of parental status may well have been inevitable. Harris (2000) suggests the subject of motherhood was one on which the leaders could not escape comparison and notes that “Whether or not the sobriquet ‘mother of the nation’ was a purely media notion, both leaders saw the need to justify themselves on this issue” (p.80). He goes on to say that it was not until late in the campaign, during a leaders’ debate, that Clark confronted this issue squarely and convincingly, which did more to neutralise it than anything else. In a sense, this may have been the final hurdle Clark had to overcome before being judged suitable to lead the country. As Jamieson (1995) notes about then United States Attorney-General Janet Reno, who is unmarried with no children, “Since the presence of children certifies that a woman is sufficiently warm to pass the femininity test, familial affections must be certified in other ways for her.” (p.168). Clark’s comments during the final leaders’ debate did just that, as The Press demonstrates:

Labour leader Helen Clark, who has no children, was asked in a television debate whether that affected her ability to understand the pressures that
families face. “It might be a source of enormous sadness to me one day,” she replied in a rare comment about her personal life. She said she came from a strong family background that gave her a sound understanding of difficulties that families faced. (Clark quizzed on kids, 1999, p.3)

Whereas Harris (2000) refrained from identifying Shipley as the source of the mother comparison, other commentators have noted the way the Prime Minister deliberately highlighted this aspect of her life. This was a reversion to an earlier trend in New Zealand politics, for in a study of women candidates in the 20th century, Wallace (1992) concluded that women’s tendency to base their political authority on their marital or familial status, common earlier in the century, had all but disappeared by 1990. Clark certainly placed the blame for the motherhood comparison on the National Party, arguing that not having children was her choice, and as an issue was irrelevant to the campaign:

What the public wants to know is “What direction will these two women take us in? What are their policies?” That’s what they’re interested in – not our family circumstances. If that is (National’s) pitch, then I think they have misjudged. People will be saying “Oh God, who wants to know?” (Shipley’s “mum” angle misjudged, 1999, p.1).

A number of commentators concurred and suggested that the mother angle backfired for the National leader (e.g. Edwards, 1999; Dore, 1999). The media may well have contributed to the cynicism surrounding politics by regarding Shipley’s motherhood references as pure political strategy, but members of the public expressed similar sentiments. One of several letters written to the daily newspapers in this period reads:

I suspect National promoting Shipley as a mother is just for vote scoring and it is unpleasant and irrelevant. When all the leaders were men we didn’t hear about their dad role. I don’t remember women political leaders with children, such as Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir and Indira Gandhi, promoting their mumsy image. They got on with providing leadership. Would they have lowered themselves to such political point scoring? (Knowles, 1999, p.10).

NEW ZEALAND WOMEN CANDIDATES AND THE GAME FRAME

The 1999 election campaign provided a unique opportunity to examine the coverage of two women leaders, the main contenders for the role of Prime Minister in New Zealand. The bulk of empirical research in this area has compared female and male political candidates’ media coverage, and has tended to conclude that women
politicians are disadvantaged by dominant political news frames. It has been suggested that the language of politics discriminates against women, and dominant narratives of politics, when applied to women, can have negative implications (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999). Furthermore, Wahl-Jorgensen (2000) unpacks the use of the sports metaphor in political news coverage and argues that

Contextualised by a language of struggle, loss, conquest, and victory through peaceful war, sports project a heterosexist world of simulated unity and solidarity, a model national community based on male bonding (p.58).

She goes on to say “By using sports as a metaphor for politics, the perpetuation of male dominance in public life is rendered unproblematic” (p.59).

However, in contrast to these findings, the New Zealand media appeared to be looking for more aggressiveness from the women leaders. After the televised debates, commentators rewarded the aggressive behaviour, which instead supports Serini, Powers and Johnson’s (1998) finding that a woman candidate is more successful if she presents herself as “manlike”. Although an examination of the game frame themes reveals some gendered and stereotypical labels applied to the women leaders and their confrontations, it was not sustained and neither did it appear to disadvantage them uniformly. Instead, just one of the woman – National leader Jenny Shipley – appears to have been disadvantaged by the attention to polling and strategy, which likely reflects her party’s tired image and erratic leadership. As Banducci (2002) says, there is little known about gender stereotyping when both candidates are female but “there are reasons to expect that gender stereotyping will be less prominent in races where both candidates or (as in our case) both party leaders are women” (p.56). Indeed, the New Zealand Election Study in 1999 found little evidence of gender stereotyping by voters. However, the emergence of the motherhood theme shows that women politicians continue to grapple with issues related to gender. Shipley herself, rather than the media, may be responsible for the much of the attention to maternal status, suggesting women perceive traditional gender roles can strengthen their claim to political leadership. But the mixed response to her positioning indicates societal ambivalence about the place of “private sphere” or domestic values in the “public sphere” world of politics.
CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper shows that when two women are the leading players, the key elements of the political game frame remain predominantly unchanged, although some “gendered” subthemes may eventuate (in particular, in the focus on appearance and motherhood). In a prime ministerial race that focuses on women, it is impossible to say that this dominant approach to reporting politics is a disadvantage for women per se, as the incumbent female Prime Minister came off worse in strategic coverage than her female rival. However, the analysis does expose the limitations of the notion that women politicians can change the nature of political reporting. The above analysis shows – unsurprisingly – that the strategy or game frame was used in coverage of the two main party leaders. Although there were some superficial changes (for example, in language), that reflected the gender of the leaders, the themes remain consistent with other campaign contexts. Women leaders, then, do not effect change on dominant modes of news presentation. This may be particularly detrimental for women’s representation in more conventional races, when female “players” come up against a traditional male advantage in media frames. However, more positively, New Zealand’s 2002 General Election campaign will provide a fascinating site for further research, as it featured a strong female leader with well-established media relationships and skills. Future research could examine how such female leaders might have an additional ability to shape media framing of election news coverage.

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