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Character Assassination in Politics: Gendered and Racialized Attacks on Kamala Harris

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Introduction

Previous research has argued that sociopolitical debates and the polarization in public opinion about many hot-button issues—including climate change, abortion, gender equality, the U.S. civil rights movement, and marriage equality to name a few—can be understood as a conflict between two groups with opposing views (Bliuc et al., 2015). Numerous social groups are united by shared ethnic and ideological connections (Commins & Lockwood, 1979). This means that individuals who do not share or support the same distinct values are perceived by ingroup members as radically different and less moral.

Character assassination is a strategic effort embedded in power and ideological struggles in society. Liberal democracies involve a competitive party system that requires political candidates to persuade the public of their legitimacy while also calling into question the reputation and good name of their rivals, thereby undermining their influence (Thompson, 2000). In this political culture, the public display and defense of character is critical to electoral success. In democratic systems, the accumulation of symbolic capital depends on public mastery of rhetoric, argumentation, and visibility management. In the United States, candidates are expected to praise their party, attack the opposing party, and defend themselves against such attacks from opposers in political discourse (Benoit et al., 2007). Thus, character assassination is a distinctive feature of the political field that favors character-centered competition.

Current studies demonstrate the "normalization" of character attacks in politicized environments (Berti & Loner, 2021; Gerstlé & Nai, 2019; Samoilenko et al., 2017). Verbal, printed, or broadcast attacks on politicians are commonplace. Female politicians, of course, have been targets of such attacks for years. During her tenure as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in the 1980s, for example, political opponents referred to Margaret Thatcher as T.B.W., or "That Bloody Woman." The British press attacked her for a number of things that male politicians would likely not be criticized for, such as her "excessive" toughness, the shrillness of her voice, or her allegedly fussy way of dressing (Moore, 2011). These are attempts at character assassination, which is a complex social, political, and psychological phenomenon.

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In recent years, an increase in negativity and incivility has transformed global media. In the United States, the development of niche media and cable news, like *Fox News* or *MSNBC*, has contributed to a pronounced ideological tilt in news coverage which favors some political figures over others (see Higdon in this volume). Partisan media exposure promotes positive feelings toward ingroup members and negative feelings toward the outgroup (Lelkes et al., 2017; Levendusky, 2013). Tabloid journalism and television entertainment with click-bait framing and a person-centered focus normalize personal ridicule and justify character attacks on political actors (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2019). This is not isolated to the United States but has been identified in the Netherlands (van der Velden & de Kleer, 2022) and France (Gerstlé & Nai 2019), among others.

This rise in incivility has coincided with increasingly negative public perceptions of the character of political candidates, which are now more than ever tied to partisan identification (Farnsworth, 2018; Heseltine & Dorsey 2022). Previous studies addressed race, identity, as well as sociopolitical and historical contexts as key mediators of persuasive attack and defense against presidents and presidential candidates (Harris, 2012; Kienpointer, 2013; Waymer & Hill, 2023). Furthermore, female politicians face more attacks than their male counterparts, which undermines the assessment of their professional competencies (Heflick et al., 2011; Smith, 2015). In the complex gender-related double bind that juxtaposes femininity and competence, traditionally feminine qualities have historically been perceived as inconsistent with leadership (Jamieson, 1995).

To further investigate the character assassination of female politicians, this chapter features a thematic analysis of character attacks in the media targeting Kamala Harris. It illustrates the normalization of character attacks in media outlets typically perceived as mainstream, centrist, and reputable. Furthermore, it provides an analysis of how gender and race intersect in attacks against female politicians of color, highlighting these as manifestations of broader sociopolitical conflicts.

Definitions of the Topic and Previous Studies

The terms *character* and *character assassination* are commonly used in the English language, but their meaning is imprecise. While some social scientists employ the term *personality* in reference to the totality of an individual's relatively stable mental, emotional, and behavioral features, *character* is the established term to refer to the moral aspects of those features (Danziger, 1997; Garber, 2020). It concerns personality traits that are generally valued as positive by society, such as honesty, integrity, perseverance, and courage. This makes character distinct from *reputation*, which is concerned with the way character traits are perceived, constructed, and valued in public opinion (Schreiber, 2011). While someone's character tends to be relatively stable, their reputation can vary greatly over time and in the eyes of different groups.

We define *character assassination* as the deliberate destruction of an individual's reputation or credibility through character attacks. Character attacks take various forms, such as spoken remarks, rumors, pamphlets, campaign ads, cartoons, and social media posts. The term character assassination can refer not only to the *process* of damaging someone's reputation but also to the *result* of that process if the attacker is successful, namely, a damaged or destroyed reputation. Strictly speaking, the term "character assassination" is imprecise, because it is not the targeted person's character (their actual moral features) but the public perception of that character that is at stake. However, we avoid the term "reputation assassination" because it is not commonly used.

Character assassination is a cross-cultural phenomenon that can be witnessed in almost any cultural sphere, region, or historical period. Examples include an orator delivering an invective against a political opponent in the Roman Senate, an American presidential candidate posting

a derogatory message on X, formerly Twitter, about a rival, or a political dissident spreading flyers exposing the crimes of a dictator. In colloquial speech, the last example would probably not be regarded as a form of character assassination, but since we are only concerned with deliberate attacks against the reputation and credibility of individuals, we do not distinguish between justified and unjustified attacks.

Each case of character assassination includes five standard elements or pillars: not only is there is always an *attacker*, who can be an individual, but also a group or organization; there is a *target*, the person whose reputation is under fire; each character attack is conveyed by a *medium* and seeks to persuade a relevant *audience*; and each attack is shaped by its particular political, cultural and technological *context*. Recognizing these five pillars enables a cross-cultural and temporal comparison of cases.

Character assassination is a new field of academic inquiry that unites scholarship in various disciplines such as political science, psychology, rhetoric, communication studies, and history. In the past, character assassination has mostly been studied through the lenses of rhetorical and psychological theories (Benoit, 2017; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018; Shiraev, 2014). These schools of thought see character assassination from the functional perspective—as a means to an end. An emergent sociocultural approach to character assassination acknowledges the complexity of attacks, including the reality that multiple actors can engage simultaneously in attack and defense in various institutional, group, and individual contexts (Samoilenko, 2021).

Given that the effectiveness of character attacks is judged by the various audiences that constitute public opinion, the way in which audience members interpret behavior is of great significance. Among the most relevant contexts related to character assassination are gender and race (Shiraev et al., 2022). Acting outside the stereotypically perceived "appropriate" behaviors prescribed to racial and gendered identities could be considered a character flaw. For example, throughout much of U.S. history, the so-called "feminine behavior" required participation in a heteropatriarchal marriage geared toward being a "good wife" and raising children. Women who departed from these expectations by seeking political power were and still are often attacked as unlikable or inappropriately masculine (Potter, 2019). Women of color have for years faced the additional burden of negotiating racialized stereotypes, such as being angry or overly sexualized (Motro et al., 2022). While social norms are changing, this study illustrates the continued prevalence of gendered and racialized stereotypes, which become fodder for character attacks. While the origin of these stereotypes is beyond the scope of this chapter (but see Baumeister & Vohs, 2007), the key point is that character attacks based on gender and race are a prominent means of engaging in conflict in competitive political systems.

Illustrative Example: The Character Assassination of Kamala Harris

To explore the relationship between character assassination and the contexts of gender and race more deeply, we conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of character attacks against Vice President Kamala Harris. Thematic analysis "is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Given Harris's identity as a woman of color and her prominence once announced as President Biden's choice for second in command, her case offers a prime example of how gender and race intertwine. We searched news coverage and opinion pieces on Harris from the time of her announcement as a vice presidential candidate in mainstream political news outlets in the United States and the United Kingdom: *The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today, Politico, The Hill, LA Times, The Guardian*, and *The Daily Telegraph*. We selected these sources to give insight into a broad range of mainstream coverage of the candidate and later vice president. We chose prominent

and major sources to understand the exposure of broad audiences to character attacks, opting for outlets generally regarded as relatively centrist ("Home of the Media Bias Chart", n.d.). Certainly, attacks abound in blogs and on X, formerly Twitter, but we sought a macro-level mainstream perspective.

Once we had identified the sources for our investigation, we proceeded to search for articles related to Kamala Harris, focusing on keywords that would suggest instances of attacks. We limited our date range to after she was announced as Biden's running mate, so our dataset included articles from August 2020 to January 2022 (when we completed the thematic analysis). After a preliminary sampling, we inductively identified three main descriptive categories or themes from the dataset: her alleged meanness, her authenticity, and her status as a U.S. citizen. These are common features of attack that have already been established in previous research into character assassination (Shiraev et al., 2022). With these themes in mind, we went back to our sources and used additional related search phrases to gather any articles we may have missed in our first search. Some articles referenced more than one theme. All told, 27 articles discussed her meanness, 35 her inauthenticity, and 13 her allegedly questionable citizenship status.

In most cases, the selected news media were not the originators of these allegations against Harris. Most of the character attacks were actually launched by President Trump and others sympathizing with a Republican agenda and were then reported by the aforementioned news outlets in the United States and the United Kingdom. In terms of the five pillars of character assassination, we could label Trump and other Republicans as the *attackers*, Harris as the *target* and the news outlets as the *media* conveying the attacks. Nevertheless, the news outlets decided to publish and thus further spread the attacks on Harris, with or without qualifications. In a few cases, they also published negative opinion pieces on her, thus blurring the boundary between (more or less) neutral medium and hostile attacker. The next sections provide the findings of our analysis.

"Harris Is Mean"

The first cluster of character attacks surrounds Harris's alleged nastiness or meanness. This was a trope to which Trump returned repeatedly. Shortly after the Biden campaign announced her as the running mate in 2020, Trump described her as "extraordinarily nasty" and "so angry," remarks which media outlets picked up on (see Ryzik et al., 2020). Almost every major news outlet pointed out that Trump found Harris's behavior during the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh to be disrespectful and aggressive (Jansen, 2020; Karni & Peters, 2020; Noor, 2020; Smith, 2020; Riley-Smith 2020). Once serving as vice president, concerns about her meanness also arose in response to several high-profile staff departures in her office in December 2021. While left-leaning or more centrist media often reported these departures with a neutral tone (see Rogers & Kanno-Youngs, 2021), some framed them as a reflection of her leadership. The *Washington Post*, for instance, published an article including interviews with 18 former and current staffers. One staffer reported, "With Kamala you have to put up with a constant amount of soul-destroying criticism and also her own lack of confidence. So you're constantly sort of propping up a bully and it's not really clear why" (qtd. in Wootson & Pager, 2021). Others quoted in the article defended Harris, pointing out that a tough management style was expected of a man, and as a result, criticisms were rooted in sexism and racism.

In addition to reporting on the comments from the Trump campaign, opinion pieces in mainstream publications pointed to the resonances of these chosen insults with a long history of racist and sexist discourse. The sociologist Michael Eric Dyson pointed at the notion of the "angry black woman" whose lack of complacency undermines white (male) power, while these

attacks reminded sociologist David Pilgrim of the "mammy archetype" of the strong-willed black housekeeper from the postbellum South (Ryzik et al., 2020). The veiled reference to such racist cultural tropes and stereotypes makes the framing of Harris as "nasty" by Trump and others a form of *enthymematic attack*, a rhetorical assault wherein a receptive audience "fills in" a portion of the argument for the speaker.

"Harris Is Inauthentic"

A second cluster of attacks asserted that Harris was "phony" or inauthentic. Authenticity as a political trope has troubled women seeking political power (Parry-Giles, 2014). Because the U.S. public tends to seek candidates expressing their true selves (Potter, 2019), women, who are expected to be caring, nurturing, and other-directed instead of decisive and competent, face an authenticity challenge. Thus, in performing traits expected of leaders to demonstrate their credentials, women are often dismissed as inauthentic or pandering. As Hillary Clinton, so too Kamala Harris. In fact, the Trump campaign seized on "phony Kamala" as a label in the hours after Biden announced her as his pick (Day, 2020; Jamerson & Day, 2020). Many newspapers covered this label, particularly following its appearance in a Trump campaign video (Astor, 2020; Glueck & Kaplan, 2020; Kumar, 2020; Smith, 2020). While not often explained, the label seemed intended to show that Harris was a radical liberal who was posing as a moderate to pull the Biden campaign to the left (Rucker & Stanley-Becker, 2020). Other coverage of the Trump campaign ad surmised that it showed that Harris was an "opportunist willing to shift her positions" (Samuels, 2020a), a claim confirmed by a Trump spokeswoman and reported in a variety of locales (Gambino & Greve, 2020; Johnson, 2020).

Overwhelmingly, the coverage of this character attack reported that Trump campaign materials used it and that *Fox News* was circulating it. Once again, however, a few opinion pieces pointed out that this label, too, had racist and sexist resonances. A news analysis in *The New York Times*, for instance, quoted *Fox* host Tucker Carlson describing Harris as a "transparent fraud" and then went on to share expert opinion noting that this label takes on "culturally loaded meaning" when used against black women (Astor, 2020). This is because it points to a deep-seated sense that Harris doesn't belong in the United States, according to Tina Tchen of *Time's Up* (qtd. in Astor, 2020).

A related attack coincided with allegations of insincerity, and it centered around Harris's laughter. Indeed, many newspaper columns reported stories indicating that Harris's laugh itself was phony (Bierman, 2021). Once again, reports, including Noah Bierman's (2021) in the *LA Times,* indicated that Harris was facing the challenge of having to appear likable while also tough in her role as vice president, which led to divided opinions on the authenticity of her laugh. Her staffers insisted that her laugh was authentic and indicative of a joyful personality (qtd. in Bierman, 2021). Newspapers also pointed out that at times Harris seemed to laugh at inappropriate moments. An opinion piece in *The Guardian* identified a tendency to laugh off tough consequences of policies (Robinson, 2019). Likewise, *USA Today* reported on an unfitting laugh when asked if she planned to visit the border in 2021 during a refugee crisis (Link, 2021), explaining that the laugh was taken out of context in a variety of conservative outlets. Yet, the idea that Harris "laughed off" traveling to the U.S.'s southern border was widely reported in other outlets, including *The Hill* (Peek, 2021). In addition, the issue surrounding Harris's laugh also concerns an overall impression of presidentiality, or the capacity to appear presidential. Implicit in these character attacks is the idea that someone who fits the grave, powerful, and serious conception we have of the office of president, which is also gendered male, would not have a loud and awkward laugh.

"Harris Is Not a Citizen"

The final cluster of attacks that was pervasive in our thematic analysis entailed the question of whether Harris was a U.S. citizen. Accusing an individual of being an impostor or lacking the formal qualifications for a political or professional role, despite their merit, represents a distinct form of character attack in the realms of history and politics. Law professor John Eastman at Chapman University questioned Harris's birth certificate. Eastman published an original article alleging that Harris was not a citizen in *Newsweek*, but coverage of it circulated throughout mainstream news sources as well. Likewise, President Trump gave voice to Eastman's unfounded claim in August 2020, saying "I heard it today that she doesn't meet the requirements" (qtd. in Rogers, 2020). The publication of Eastman's article and Trump's veiled reference to it garnered attention from other mainstream outlets. A character attack is often generated from the "top" and then disseminated by various media sources.

Unlike some of the other character attacks which were reported without editorial comment, this one was often debunked as it was reported. For instance, *New York Times* reporter Katie Rogers (2020) called the attack a "racist conspiracy theory" in her coverage of the Trump campaign. *The Washington Post* ran this attack through their fact-checking page and rated it "four Pinocchios" (Rizzo, 2020). *The Hill*, too, stated plainly, "Harris is eligible to hold the office of vice president" (Samuels, 2020b). They also referred to the claim as a "conspiracy theory" in their coverage (Coleman, 2020). Perhaps the fact that this attack already circulated in relation to President Obama or the heightened attention to racial justice on the national stage made prominent news publications more hesitant to report this attack without also flagging its falseness.

Critical Examination of the Case and Character Assassination Framework

This study supports prior observations that gendered and racialized personal attacks on female politicians have become part of media discourse in the United States. It also places these attacks in a growing body of scholarship on character assassination. Importantly, character attacks are no longer only present in the echo chambers of ideological (social) media but are recirculated and even featured in the mainstream, centrist press. This case study of character attacks on Vice President Kamala Harris in mainstream news sources illustrates the remaining challenges for powerful women in negotiating conceptions of character. Harris faces the additional burden of race-based stereotypes as well.

As we conclude, it is worth exploring what this case study indicates about the concept of character assassination and political conflict more broadly. One can read this study and be genuinely appalled by the injustices that women encounter when seeking political office. As a result, this chapter might seem unsatisfying in its failure to condemn the news sources for continuing to give life to these stories, many of which originated with the Trump campaign. However, we have designed the term character assassination to be morally neutral. This chapter's goal is to identify and categorize common attacks against Harris. It is certainly possible to condemn these attacks, just as it is possible to read about other instances of character attacks and cheer the attackers for their ability to speak truth to power, such as when character attacks help dethrone a dictator. Both cases would still, under our framework, represent instances of character assassination. Some scholars or practitioners may feel comfortable drawing moral evaluations, while others may not. Our framework is sufficiently adaptable to be applied across a diverse range of fields.

This case study also indicates that character attacks can be both true and false and everywhere in between. For instance, it is quite easy to prove that Harris is indeed a U.S. citizen eligible to hold the office of the vice president. As a result, the attacks from Eastman and the Trump campaign are

false but given that they still circulated in the public and may have caused some members of the voting public to view her disparagingly, they are still effective character attacks. Yet, information that is true and gets exposed to the public can also function as a character attack and harm someone's reputation. The truth or falsity of an attack may influence how persuasive it is to the public, but it would not change our classification of it as a form of character assassination.

Finally, it is also possible to read this essay and wonder whether character assassination has occurred at all. After all, Harris still serves as vice president and represents a powerful symbol of women's political progress. Again, our definition and framework do not require character attackers to be successful to be classified as character assassination. Few character attackers achieve their objectives completely, and a total assassination of character is rare.

The case of Kamala Harris illustrates the variety of types of attacks along with the utility of studying character assassination as a lens on political conflict.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study shows that attacks on Kamala Harris fit into three main clusters: accusations of being mean, being inauthentic, and being an imposter. These clusters are interpreted in the context of racist and sexist political discourse: they indicate a public reaction to Harris's rise as a national candidate and vice president that was deeply influenced by her race and gender. These attacks discredit her expertise and hold her to different standards than candidates and politicians in varying identity categories. As the U.S. political sphere attempts greater inclusiveness, it is important to notice that these attacks not only still exist but weigh far more heavily on candidates of gender and color.

This study also suggests that although centrist media did not usually originate personal attacks against Harris, they reproduced and amplified the attacks made by key political opponents and their supporters. This suggests that the tendency of mainstream, centrist media to strive for "impartiality of facts" may at times be conducive to attempts at character assassination and further political conflict. Future research should address similarities and differences in media framing techniques in character attacks. New studies should also investigate and test the effectiveness of responses to gendered and racialized character attacks, which are likely to remain a pervasive method of political discourse.

While many studies on persuasive attack and defense provide valuable insights on the use of character assassination in political polemics, most of this work is deficient in analyzing how individual actions can be explained by group dynamics or larger sociocultural processes. A potential direction for future research is to link the study of character assassination to the large body of literature on social and political conflict. Future research should specifically address the use of character attacks against political and ideological opponents as strategic efforts that are socially constructed in ideological intergroup conflicts.

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