

Topic 6.6: Gendered Language in Media Coverage of Women in Politics

How many times have you heard the statement “You Guys” spoken almost automatically as part of everyday conversation, as though everyone present is a member of one gender? To object or try to correct the statement seems hopeless. Few speakers take the time to use gender-inclusive or gender-neutral terms such as “folks,” “everybody,” “friends,” “y’all,” or “team.”

Words, and the meanings we assign to them, matter hugely in how people think and act not only in everyday conversations, but in how the media covers women and men in politics. Consider how the media writes and talks differently about political campaigns and job performances of women and men in government positions such as mayor, representative, senator, or judge. A commitment to equality under the law and justice for all is harder to sustain when the words used are specific to a male gender.



[Women of the 116th Congress](#) | Public Domain

Does language use by the media impact people's attitudes and behaviors? Does it matter if news reports or reporters say "policemen" or "law enforcement officers" or "firemen" or "firefighters" or if they describe women and men in politics differently?

A recent cross-national study established that **genderless language** or **gender-inclusive language** combats negative stereotypes toward women while promoting broader career opportunities for females in traditionally male-dominated fields, including politics ([Perez & Tavits, 2019](#)).

You can explore more about **gender-inclusive, non-binary, and anti-racist language** in state constitutions, laws and materials in [Topic 6.6 of our Building Democracy for All eBook](#).

In the following activities, you will examine the use of gendered language in media coverage of women in politics while envisioning

how people's views might develop if more genderless language were used instead in politics and in everyday interactions in schools and society.

Bonus Media Literacy Activity: Examine the use of Gendered Language on Television Shows and YouTube Channel Streams

Choose a particular woman in politics, a specific election, or a specific political job where women's presence is still minimal/rare (e.g., Hillary Clinton and the 2008 or 2016 election; Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, or Amy Klobuchar and the 2020 election; or the women justices on the Supreme Court, past and present - Sandra Day O'Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonya Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, Amy Coney Barrett).

- Conduct a search for news media (e.g., online articles, videos) that reference the female you selected.
- See how many times and in what context are they:
 - (a) are referred to by their first names;
 - (b) are referred to by their last names;
 - (c) have mentions of their bodies, facial expressions, and/or appearances;
 - (d) are given an infantilizing or insulting nickname.
- Then, conduct counter research. Select a male politician.
- See how many times and in what context are they:
 - (a) are referred to by their first names;
 - (b) are referred to by their last names;
 - (c) have mentions of their bodies, facial expressions, and/or appearances;
 - (d) are given an infantilizing or insulting nickname.
- What similarities and differences did you notice between how

women and men in politics are presented in the media? Why do you think this is so? How might this influence the general public's thoughts about these individuals?

- **Present your analysis in a video, interactive timeline, or paper.**

Bonus Media Literacy Activity: Examine the use of Gendered Language on Television Shows and YouTube Channel Streams

- Record how many times the term "You Guys" is said in a single episode of your favorite TV shows or YouTube channel streams.
- **Write a PRAISE or PROTEST letter** to the producer of the TV show or YouTube Channel Stream creator about the use gendered language or gender-inclusive language.

Additional Resources

- [Women in Congress](#)
- [Women in the Senate](#)
- [Women on the Supreme Court](#)
- ["You Guys": Is There A Better Option?](#)

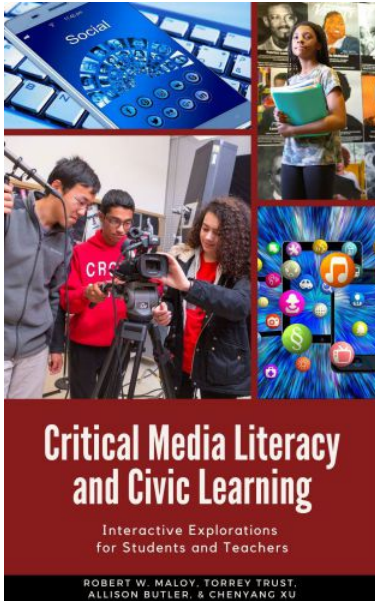
Connecting to the eBook

[Building Democracy for All: Gender-Inclusive, Non-Binary, and Anti-Racist Language and Images in State Constitutions, Laws, and Materials](#)

Connecting to the Standards

- [Massachusetts Civics & Government Standards](#)
 - *Identify additional protections provided by the Massachusetts Constitution that are not provided by the U.S. Constitution.* (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) **[8.T6.6]**
- [ISTE Standards](#)
 - Knowledge Constructor
 - 3a: Students plan and employ effective research strategies to locate information and other resources for their intellectual or creative pursuits.
 - 3b: Students evaluate the accuracy, perspective, credibility and relevance of information, media, data or other resources.
 - 3d: Students build knowledge by actively exploring real-world issues and problems, developing ideas and theories and pursuing answers and solutions.
 - Creative Communicator
 - 6a: Students choose the appropriate platforms and tools for meeting the desired objectives of their creation or communication.
- [DLCS Standards](#)
 - Interpersonal and Societal Impact (CAS.c)
 - Collaboration and Communication (DTC.b)
 - Research (DTC.c)
- [English Language Arts > History/Social Studies Common Core Standards](#)
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.5
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7



Maloy, R. W., Trust, T., , & Xu, C. (2021). *Critical Media Literacy and Civic Learning*. Equity Press.
<https://equitypress.org/mediaandciviclearning>