

My interest in understanding the rumors of the 1952 election surrounding Adlai Stevenson began through reading David K. Johnson's monograph *The Lavender Scare*. Johnson's book is compelling, but it only briefly discussed the way that the Lavender Scare — the moral panic surrounding alleged queer people in the US government in the 1950s — impacted presidential politics. I was disappointed in how little had been written about the rumors that Democratic presidential nominee Stevenson was gay; and I later learned that this lack of coverage is due to the difficulty of researching this rumor. To study it, I needed to look at the newspapers that played a big role in fueling this misconception, gossip magazines that attempted to report on this rumor, and the FBI, which monitored the spread of it. Obtaining access to these sources was a difficult task. Once I finally began discovering how to access these sources my argument slowly evolved.

I began my search by utilizing the footnotes of secondary sources. Getting recommendations for sources from my thesis advisor alongside looking further into citations from the works I read, provided me with a solid base of background information on my topic. Additionally, making an appointment with a research librarian helped me better understand how to use the Shields Library databases and techniques I needed to find more sources online. I looked into articles and monographs the library recommended alongside my searches. I also looked at secondary sources' footnotes tactic to start my primary source research. From the sources cited in secondary literature, I identified the newspapers, FBI files, and gossip magazine articles that I needed to read.

Due to the stigma at the time surrounding homosexuality, many primary sources did not overtly discuss the rumors around Stevenson's sexuality. Due to this, I had to look closely at my secondary sources that discussed the rumor. These sources provided me hints on what words I

should use to search primary source databases. Originally, I planned this project to focus simply on sexuality; however, through my secondary research I realized the importance of gender as well. Through my sources I learned many primary sources implied their attacks on Stevenson's sexuality through commentary on his gender. I began my search believing a term such as "homosexuality" would provide me with sources, but in reality terms such as "Adelaide," a feminine version of "Adlai," were more helpful. I relied heavily on Newspapers.com to search the New York *Daily News*, a hugely popular tabloid newspaper of the era, and an interlibrary loan of the Chicago *Daily News* microform. Interlibrary loans also allowed me to look into other primary sources that Shields did not have. Sources that I would originally need to travel to access were conveniently scanned and sent to me by other libraries.

I found that it was sometimes hard to search for primary sources because the secondary sources were not reliably footnoted. The first historical source that commented on the feminization of Stevenson in newspapers, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* by Richard Hofstadter, simply cited the New York *Daily News*, without any specific dates. Later literature that also commented on the feminization of Stevenson simply cited Hofstadter. This meant that the authors and dates of these newspaper articles were unknown. I had to work around this by simply using the language cited in these sources and looking up the *Daily News* on Newspapers.com. Through this tactic, I discovered most of the newspaper articles cited by my secondary sources. Then I relied on the language in these newspaper articles to find new ones not originally cited by Hofstadter.

Another challenge I faced was having to alter my topic based on the information I found. Multiple secondary sources mentioned that gossip magazines also commented on the Stevenson rumor. Unfortunately, library databases on gossip magazines during this era were sparse

according to my searches on WorldCat. Thanks to the internet, I discovered the Houston LGBT Archive, which had a large database of gossip magazine articles relating to homosexuality. After talking to the archivist running the website, I finally got access to the magazine sources related to Stevenson; however, I discovered that these articles barely discussed Stevenson and instead focused entirely on defaming his ex-wife, Ellen Borden Stevenson. This discovery originally had nothing to do with my original topic, but I found the magazines important, so I altered my argument to include how presidential politics also attempted to regulate femininity.

Accessing the FBI files on Stevenson's sexuality also created barriers. After filing a freedom of information request with the FBI, I was told their databases have no files relating to Stevenson's sexuality and was redirected to the National Archives. After filing another request with the National Archives which also ended with no sources found, I began to do more research into my secondary sources. I was lucky to find a monograph on FBI files during the 20th century that included transcriptions on the investigations of Stevenson's sexuality. While this monograph only discussed the rumor as an example of the power of the FBI, I relied on these transcriptions as a primary source to analyze these files in terms of gender and sexuality.

A key point in my work was to expand on the existing commentary on the Stevenson rumor. The existing literature I read only briefly mentioned that the Stevenson rumor existed, and this usually only consisted of a few pages out of a large monograph. These sources also barely mention Borden Stevenson, except perhaps for a quick discussion that she was blamed as a source for the rumor. I wanted to turn Stevenson and Borden Stevenson into the main focus rather than allowing them to exist as a small subsection to a larger work. I evaluated my primary sources in terms of their language to find any evidence of defaming Stevenson or Borden Stevenson. My goal was to elaborate on each individual piece of evidence to write about how

each specific source contributed to the overall portrayal of gender and sexuality norms.

Therefore, word choice played the biggest role in determining which sources I believed were the most important.

Despite the challenges I faced in my search for evidence, I was able to complete my goal of creating a larger analysis of the Stevenson rumor. Through the interlibrary loan, librarian appointments, and the general search feature of the library I was able to conduct sufficient secondary and primary research to complete this project. My thesis, which originated as a discussion of Cold War sexuality, transformed into a discussion of how presidential campaigns utilized sexuality and gender to establish a basis for what normative gender and sexuality should look like.

No AI tools/technologies were used in the writing of this essay.