

Gender Targeting in Political Advertisements

Political Research Quarterly
2015, Vol. 68(4) 816–829
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1065912915605182
prq.sagepub.com



Mirya R. Holman¹, Monica C. Schneider², and Kristin Pondel²

Abstract

Campaigns invoke identity appeals to specific groups of voters, including women. To understand whether these campaign appeals matter in affecting voters' choices, we must better understand how women respond to these appeals, the causal mechanism driving responses, and whether male and female candidates can use these ads with equal effectiveness. Using a nationally representative sample of American voters and an experimental design, we test an identity-based appeal aimed at women. We find that, although candidates of either gender can use these ads to affect women's votes, only female candidates are able to prime female voters' gender identity. The use of these appeals by male candidates persuades female voters of their positive traits. Male voters are generally unaffected by the appeals. Given the integration of women and men in the general population, our results demonstrate the utility of targeted appeals in encouraging support from a specific group and avoiding backlash from others.

Keywords

gender, campaigns, political ads, identity, campaign strategy, U.S. politics

During the 2012 election, one of Barack Obama's often-used presidential campaign videos featured his wife Michelle speaking directly to women (<https://www.barackobama.com/women/>):

This November, there is so much on the line for all of us, but especially for women. Our votes will determine whether we will keep fighting for equal pay in the workplace, whether we keep supporting women small business owners, and whether women will be able to make our own decisions about our bodies and our healthcare.

The ad is but one of the hundreds of appeals aimed at women from campaigns on both sides of the political spectrum in recent elections, including the campaign of Alma Adams, the hundredth woman elected to Congress, who touted on her website that she is "Standing up for women," through protecting reproductive rights and fighting for paycheck fairness (Christensen 2012; Wilson 2012). Beginning in the early 2000s and continuing through the 2014 elections, the United States has seen a marked increase in campaigns' use of marketing techniques aimed at specific groups, including women. These strategies provide fodder for journalists (with headlines such as "Microtargeting: How campaigns know you better than you know yourself" [Brennan 2012]) and election analysts (Issenberg 2012) alike, but political scientists have yet to clearly understand the effects of such targeted messages. In studying these appeals, we provide insight

into whether and how campaigns matter (e.g., Brady, Johnston, and Sides 2006), as well as how group identity functions to influence political preferences and processing of campaign messages. Understanding how voters respond to specific campaign materials and how they use this information to choose a representative can help political scientists evaluate voters' ability to "vote correctly" (Lau and Redlawsk 1997) and the representativeness of the American political system.

In this paper, we define *identity-based targeting* as a candidate's efforts to appeal to voters' affective attachments to their politicized social groups. We then conduct an experimental test of the effects of these appeals on a nationally representative sample. We focus on messages targeting female voters for several reasons. First, women make up over half of the voting electorate and are thus an important group for understanding campaign dynamics (Schaffner 2005). Second, women have been shown to use their identity in their vote decision (Brians 2005; Dolan 1998; Paolino 1995; Plutzer and Zipp 1996), and

¹Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, USA

²Miami University, Oxford, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:

Mirya R. Holman, Department of Political Science, Tulane University, 6823 St. Charles Ave, Norman Mayer 321, New Orleans, LA 70118, USA.

Email: mholman@tulane.edu

recent attention has been drawn to the importance of courting female voters (Abdullah 2012; Anderson, Lewis, and Baird 2011; Casserly 2012). Third, women's voting patterns are distinct from men's, often because of campaign dynamics (Ondercin and Bernstein 2007; Schaffner 2005). Fourth, studying women is normatively important, as women are descriptively underrepresented throughout politics (CAWP 2015). Therefore, attempts by campaigns to woo female voters can have implications for women's substantive and descriptive representation (Mansbridge 1999). Thus, understanding the relationship between targeted campaign messages and women's reactions is crucial to evaluating current and future political contexts.

Using an experimental design that features material from an actual candidate's website, we test the effects of identity targeting on the intended recipients of the message (women), the unintended recipients (men) from both an in-group source (female candidate) and an out-group source (male candidate). Although we expected female candidates' messages to impact candidate support more than that of male candidates, our results show that identity-targeted ads from both female and male candidates positively impact candidate support, but through different mechanisms. Female voters are persuaded by a female candidate's identity appeals because these ads prime gender identity, whereas male candidates benefit because such ads increase perceptions of their positive traits by female voters. The ads do not cause a backlash from male voters. These results point to a need to integrate the theories and effects of candidate strategy with an understanding of social identity and group membership to appreciate how specific appeals change evaluations of politicians. Our research has implications for the potential of campaign messages to shape a voter's ability to choose the best representative for her interests and preferences.

Background

Gender plays an important role in politics, guiding how voters consider parties, candidates, and issues (Brians 2005; Dolan 1998; Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003; Paolino 1995; Plutzer and Zipp 1996; Schaffner 2005). Since 1980, women, more than men, have supported the Democratic Party in national elections (Diekman and Schneider 2010; Ondercin and Bernstein 2007), with the gender gap varying significantly across states, contexts, and campaign environments (Ondercin and Bernstein 2007; Schaffner 2005). Given the evidence that women behave differently than men in politics, as well as the higher turnout rates of female voters, it makes strategic sense for campaigns to create messages aimed at gaining women's support.

As campaigns intensify their efforts to attract female voters, they have also become increasingly reliant on

consumer-marketing techniques (Bailey 2004; Issenberg 2012), including seeking out smaller groups of voters to send individualized messages. These messages are referred to as a "dog whistle," a sound only heard by a limited group that is ideally not heard by another group for fear of how that group might react (i.e., Hillygus and Shields 2008). We refer to this broad strategy as *targeting*, defined as sending a message from a candidate tailored to a group with the intent of influencing the group to evaluate the candidate favorably. To identify these voters, strategists depend upon databases of consumer information, party registration data, and issue preferences. The campaigns then narrowcast messages to the group through customized media efforts such as direct mail, e-mail, text messages, web pages, and ads, phone calls, and personal canvassing (Hillygus and Shields 2008). In creating such messages, campaigns assume that members of these groups possess unique values or issue priorities or are subject to distinctive framing because of shared characteristics.

We classify the targeted messages into two groups to study their effects. *Issue-based targeting* involves directing messages to voters based on particular issues that the campaign believes that they support. Other than being identified by the campaign as potentially caring about a particular issue, the group does not exist in cohesive form and, therefore, has little preexisting affective identity associated with it. To create an issue-based targeted message, a senator might identify that manufacturing jobs matter more to voters in a certain area and message that area with information about the senator's actions on manufacturing. For example, Hillygus and Shields (2008) found that candidates use information from voter databases to attempt to persuade cross-pressured partisans—those who disagree with their party on one or more issues—using those specific issues of disagreement, such as stem cell research or abortion. The mechanism of changing vote behavior could be priming—which is defined as indirectly changing voters' evaluations of the candidate by directing the attention of the public to evaluate the candidate on one specific issue over others—or it could persuade voters—defined as directly changing voters' evaluations of the candidate (Bartels 2006; Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003).

The messages targeting women described at the outset, however, are not simply issue-based targeting, but involve *identity-based targeting*, or appealing to women based on the emotional attachment they have to their in-group (Huddy 2002).¹ Identity-based targeting is distinguished from issue-based targeting by the inclusion of symbolic appeals to a group that are designed to promote a sense of shared group identity or interests beyond the agreement on a particular issue that the issue-based targeted messages are intended to create. An identity-based

appeal requires that the ad include a message, symbol, or photograph to clarify the group as the target; for example, naming that the candidate is in favor of the group, the inclusion of images of group members, or identifying that certain issue positions are in the interest of the group.

Both parties exert significant effort in reaching out to female voters through identity appeals to elicit support from women (Abdullah 2012; Anderson, Lewis, and Baird 2011; Casserly 2012; Schaffner 2005). In each of the examples below, a candidate expressly appealed to women using more than just issues: there is an open statement of an appeal to women's identity, sometimes including the use of female surrogates to emphasize the message that the candidate's deep relationship with women indicates he is able to represent female voters (Mansbridge 1999; Pitkin [1967] 1972). Barack Obama's 2012 *Women for Obama* campaign targeted women by featuring female Republican Obama supporters and female celebrities under a website section headed "women" to elicit an emotional attachment to the group and discussed how Obama would "represent women"; the campaign combined this with appeals based on equal pay, healthcare, and contraception. Romney's campaign used testimonials from women who had served in his cabinet about his sensitivity to the needs of working women and, in an ad entitled "Dear Daughter," outlined the economic costs paid by women under the Obama administration. The 2012 campaign was not the first—or the last—to use gender-based appeals. In 1956, Eisenhower used a female spokesperson in an appeal to female voters that discussed the cost of living, family safety, and peace. Mary Tyler Moore appeared in a 1980 ad for Carter's 1980 campaign, and George W. Bush's "W Stands for Women" campaign featured his wife and other female surrogates. In the 2014 senate race in New Hampshire, Jean Shaheen presented herself as "a fierce advocate for women," touting her work to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act, stop sexual assault in the military, and expand childcare tax credits.

Targeting female voters can pose a challenge for candidates. Women are often thought to lack a cohesive group membership, yet they do have a set of shared group interests (Sapiro 1981). Although women may display some characteristics associated with other minority groups (such as self-identification with the group), women are integrated with the "other" (i.e., men) and thus may be unable to develop a high degree of internal political efficacy or high levels of political mistrust. Gurin (1985, 145) argues that women may not form group consciousness because they are socialized with men (as children, siblings, friends, and classmates) and "cleavage and conflict rarely develop between groups that share such fundamental values." Indeed, given the race, class, partisan, ethnic, and ideological differences (among others) that influence

women's attitudes, invoking identity among women is typically difficult. Moreover, candidates would like their "dog whistle" messages to be heard by only one group and not heard by another, which is nearly impossible to do with women. Women cannot be geographically isolated the way many racial and ethnic groups are. Men, who are likely to be exposed at least somewhat to these targeted messages, could have a negative reaction to such messages, thereby causing more damage than good to the candidate. This integration also means that many issues that women care about (such as domestic violence or sexual assault) are also concerns of men, thus crafting messages "for women" may be a challenge for campaigns. Candidates certainly target more groups than just women, a point to which we return in the conclusion, but women represent an interesting yet difficult case for candidates to target effectively to create a positive impact on vote choice and minimizing risk of backlash from male voters.

In sum, campaigns engage in widespread use of these identity-based appeals, yet political science knows very little about whether and how these appeals work. Our research begins to remedy this gap by providing a theory and experimental evidence to address how targeted campaign materials can influence the identity and issues used in voters' decisions.

Hypotheses

Intended Targets

Political campaigns certainly use identity-based targeting to gain votes, yet the evidence on whether or not vote choice shifts as a result of these messages, compared with issue-based messages, is contradictory. Some scholars find that issue-targeted messages do produce changes in votes (Hillygus and Shields 2008; Weber and Thornton 2012). However, others find very limited evidence that identity-based targeting in particular positively affects the intended recipients (Hersh and Schaffner 2013). The preponderance of the studies on this topic do not evaluate a main effect of the identity-based targeted messages, but instead consider a priming effect of identity and how that influences vote choice, which we discuss in more detail below. We are therefore left to speculate as to whether the female respondents will prefer a candidate with an identity-based message to an issue-based message, all else equal. We imagine, however, that the campaigns design these messages with this type of voting effect in mind, and therefore, posit as a default hypothesis that *among women, the likelihood of voting for a candidate with an identity-based targeted message will be greater than the likelihood of voting for a candidate with an issue-based message* (Hypothesis 1 [H1]).

The source of a message can influence its effectiveness (e.g., Druckman 2001) such that messages from an

in-group member are more persuasive than those from an out-group member, particularly with a relevant issue (Mackie et al. 1992). Indeed, black respondents were more likely to agree with an identical statement when it was attributed to in-group member Jesse Jackson instead of George H. W. Bush (Kuklinski and Hurley 1994). Many of the readily available examples of targeted messages to women are from a male politician or from female surrogates on behalf of a male politician. Given the importance of source cues in persuasion and message acceptance, we consider the gender of the source as an important independent variable. As such, we expect that *an identity-based message from a female candidate will be more successful than a similar message from a male candidate* (Hypothesis 2 [H2]).

We next turn to the mechanism behind the effectiveness of these ads; in particular, ads from female candidates that use an identity-based targeted message should *prime* identity, where priming is defined as “systematic increases in the weights voters attach to particular political considerations” (Bartels 2006, 85). Having their group clearly defined by campaign rhetoric would naturally direct people toward feelings of group consciousness, provide the salience and clarity of a group cue, and “sympathy toward their in-group” (Conover 1988, 62; Tolleson-Rinehart 1992). The symbolic appeals in identity-based targeting encourage the recipient to “increase the weight” attached to identity in evaluating candidate traits and expressing preference for that candidate (Conover 1988). Other scholars find that identity or a sense of linked fate can increase support for a candidate who shares that group identity (Hersh and Schaffner 2013; Jackson 2011). Combining priming identity with the rationale behind a greater success rate for female candidates, we argue that *an identity-based message from a female candidate will prime group-based social identity, increasing vote support among women* (Hypothesis 3a [H3a]). The mechanism behind the effects of an identity-based message from a male candidate will likely be positive changes in the other ingredients of vote choice (i.e., trait or issue evaluations). This speculation is consistent with Weber and Thornton (2012), who find that when information was present, it was more important than a religious identity prime. In short, when primes are ineffective, voters will revert to traditional factors in vote choice. Thus, *an identity-based message from a male candidate will not similarly prime group-based social identity among women* (Hypothesis 3b [H3b]).

Unintended Recipients

We consider the effects of a targeted message on men, the unintended recipients, as men are inevitably exposed to this targeting. Theories of group membership suggest that

gendered messages may elicit a negative response among males. Ads promoting women’s identity may cue feelings of threat or “backlash” among male respondents, especially if the message is from a female candidate (Huddy 2003). Mendelberg (2001) finds that the unintended recipients (blacks) of a message aimed at whites exposed the unjust nature of the racially targeted message, rendering it ineffective. Additional research on consumer behavior finds that ads that prime identity produce a negative reaction from out-group members (Forehand et al. 2002). As such, we suggest that *among unintended recipients of an identity-based message, the message will prime negative group attitudes about women, reducing vote support* (Hypothesis 4 [H4]).

Treatment and Method

To test our hypotheses, we employ an experimental design where we manipulate the sex of the candidate (male vs. female) and the message from the candidate (identity-based targeting or “treatment” or “Violence Against Women Treatment” vs. issue-based targeting or “control” or “Transportation Control”). The messages took the form of websites ascribed to Congresswoman/man Patricia/Tom Johnson. To maintain credibility and maximize external validity, the websites were based on the actual website of a male Republican candidate running for Congress in Pennsylvania,² and our template looks very similar to the model, including side materials, colors, and formatting. We removed partisan information, and the material was ambiguous enough to suggest a candidate of either party. Participants, described below, were randomly assigned one of four websites: male candidate with an identity-based message, male candidate with an issue-based message, female candidate with an identity-based message, or a female candidate with an issue-based message.

The identity-based (or “treatment”) website targeted women by primarily focusing on the candidate’s work on domestic violence programs. The website discussed the candidate’s role in pioneering new programs such as “‘Operation Cut it Out’ [which] trained hairstylists—who see their clients at regular intervals without their boyfriend or husband present—to recognize and report signs of domestic violence.” In addition, the treatment extolled the experiences of the candidate as a former federal prosecutor and how the candidate used that experience to “craft legislation to further protect women from harm.” The website went on to point out how the leader has worked in Congress to pass the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act and the Protecting Victims on Campus Act of 2012. The identity symbols in the treatment condition were the headline “Women for Johnson” across the top of the page, discussions of the

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Treatment Effects (Means)—Female Respondents Only.

Question	Female candidate		Male candidate	
	Control (transportation)	Treatment (VAW)	Control (transportation)	Treatment (VAW)
Capable of handling VAW (1 = <i>not well at all</i> ; 4 = <i>very well</i>)	2.56	3.58	2.26	3.63
Capable of handling transportation (1 = <i>not well at all</i> ; 4 = <i>very well</i>)	3.31	2.59	3.22	2.53
Increase funding for VAW (1 = <i>too little funding</i> ; 3 = <i>too much</i>)	1.37	1.49	1.44	1.48
Increase funding for transportation (1 = <i>too little funding</i> ; 3 = <i>too much</i>)	1.44	1.53	1.66	1.56
Evaluation of candidate's compassion (1 = <i>not well at all</i> ; 4 = <i>very well</i>)	2.64	3.28	2.74	3.20
Evaluation of candidate's strong leadership (1 = <i>not well at all</i> ; 4 = <i>very well</i>)	2.88	3.13	3.01	3.10

Source. Knowledge Networks Study. See the online appendix for sampling design and survey methodology. VAW = violence against women.

leader's ability to represent women, and a photo of women from Operation "Cut it Out." In contrast, the issue-based targeting (or "control") website focused on the Congressperson's stance toward funding transportation issues, in that "Patricia/Tom Johnson will not support any effort to increase fees or taxes without guarantees that revenue raised locally goes toward projects in our communities." Both websites end by asking citizens to get involved in Johnson's campaign.

Our approach to the experimental design was to create two targeted messages that varied on our key dimension—identity-targeted versus issue-targeted—and maximized external validity. Using nonequivalent information contexts is common in framing studies (see Chong and Druckman 2007 for a review; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009).³ To create our treatment condition, in addition to using identity symbols, we use the issue of violence against women (VAW) because it is an issue that both genders care about, but largely affects women more than men and is, therefore, an issue that a campaign might reasonably use to target women. Moreover, VAW is less associated with the Democratic Party than other "women's issues," such as abortion. To ensure high internal validity, we chose transportation for the issue-targeted condition so the conditions varied on the key dimension of identity, although not varying on other dimensions. Both issues are equally salient in American politics: neither issue ranks in the top 50 of the most important problems facing this country today (Gallup 2015). In addition, the issues do not differ on the problem of government spending—they both require spending, and they therefore incorporate both general attitudes about the issue at hand, while also tapping into related attitudes about larger debates (size of government and law enforcement vs. taxation and budgeting). Finally, both issues enjoy wide abstract levels of support from the general population (across both genders and across party lines), but there is substantial disagreement

about the appropriate solutions. VAW, therefore, is suitably paired with transportation to operationalize our key concepts.

In our primary study, we surveyed 1,026 Knowledge Networks (now GfK) panelists from June 26, 2013 to July 24, 2013; survey design, sampling details, and basic descriptive statistics are available in the online appendix (at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>), and the data are available from <http://www.tessexperiments.org/previousstudies.html>. The sample comes close to the United States in representativeness, with even demographic and political interest, knowledge, and ideology across treatment groups. We also conducted a replication study via mTurk, Amazon.com's online marketplace for hiring individuals to complete tasks. Without the controls for representativeness, the study population was younger, less diverse, and more educated than the full experiment population (see the online appendix for details). Our mTurk evaluation looks only at female respondents ($N = 205$) and a female candidate.

After examining a randomly assigned website, subjects answered a series of questions about their impression of the candidate, their feelings toward a set of groups, and their attitudes about policies. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of our key variables of interest, including our dependent variable, where respondents rated how likely they would be to vote for the candidate, as well as assessments of the candidate's traits and competence and various policy attitudes. As a manipulation check, respondents identified which issue (VAW, transportation, or healthcare) was featured; 96 percent correctly identified the issue. The results did not differ significantly when the incorrect respondents were dropped from the sample. We opted to keep these respondents in our dataset to mimic the campaign environment—voter attention often wavers, yet these voters still assess candidates and show up at the polls.

Results

Effect of Identity-Based Treatment on Vote

Our first hypothesis argues that, all else equal, an identity-based treatment (VAW) will positively influence women's likelihood of voting for the candidate compared with the issue-based control (transportation). Using an analysis of variance (ANOVA), we find that viewing the targeted message about VAW ($M = 3.36$) increases the likelihood of voting for the candidate among female respondents as compared with the issue-based control message ($M = 3.12$, $p < .002$, one-tailed test). Thus, we find some evidence for H1.

We next examine our expectation that the identity appeal will be more effective from an in-group member rather than an out-group member by comparing how women respond to the identity-based appeal with their response to the issue appeal from either a female or a male candidate. Women in the identity-based treatment condition express a higher likelihood of voting for Patricia Johnson ($M = 3.33$) than the issue-based control condition ($M = 3.10$, $p < .067$, one-tailed ANOVA test), although this difference is just outside statistical significance; we do find significance in our replication study. We find that the identity-based message is just as effective for male candidates appealing to female voters. Vote support for Tom Johnson in the identity-based treatment condition ($M = 3.38$) is significantly higher than in the issue-based control condition ($M = 3.03$, $p < .001$, one-tailed ANOVA test). Thus, we find appeals aimed at women are significant (or nearly so) coming from either a male or a female candidate. Disconfirming H2, female candidates are not more successful at using targeting to change the likelihood of voting compared with their male counterparts, as we see near identical levels of support among female respondents for the female and male candidates. Indeed, given that the male candidate receives lower support in the control condition, his use of the gendered appeal is more successful (albeit without a statistically significant difference) than the female candidate's appeal.

There are two ways that partisanship might influence our results. First, candidates who engage in identity targeting of women will be considered more democratic due to the association of women's issues with the Democratic Party, and this may influence votes. Second, respondent's party identification might interact with the treatment effects. We find little evidence for either of these two issues. We do find that respondents in the identity-based treatment are more likely to place the candidate to the left of center on a partisanship scale (4.39 on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *strong Republican* to 7 = *strong Democrat*) than are respondents in the transportation control (3.93, $p < .00$, ANOVA

test). However, this effect does not vary by candidate gender and has an insignificant effect on the likelihood of voting for either candidate, suggesting that we have isolated the effects of our key independent variable. Likelihood of voting for the candidate does not significantly differ when we consider female respondents' party identification (see the online appendix). We also include respondent party identification throughout our models.

Identity Priming

We expect that, among female respondents, priming group-based social identity will be the mechanism to underlie the effects of the identity-based targeted message. We test this by estimating the direct and interactive effects of the treatment and group-based social identity with women on likelihood of voting for the candidate using an ordered logit model, presented in Table 2. Social identity was operationalized by having respondents indicate on a 4-point scale (1 = *not close at all* and 4 = *very close*), "how close you feel toward the group. By 'close,' we mean the people who are most like you in their ideas and interests and feelings?"

There is clear evidence of a group-based identity priming effect. The interaction of treatment and closeness with women as a group is significant and positive for women when candidate gender is not considered, while neither variable is significant on its own. Importantly, we see that closeness with women \times treatment is significant and positive when the candidate was female but not male. As such, we find support for H3a: Female participants who viewed the identity-targeted message from a female candidate were more likely to use their closeness with women as a group in their overall evaluation of the candidate as compared with those who viewed the transportation message. We also find support for H3b, as the aforementioned effect occurs for the female candidate's website, but not the male candidate's.⁴ Figure 1 illustrates this relationship.

Alternative Specifications

We consider alternative specifications to our model for two purposes: to rule out any other explanation for the effect of targeted messages for a female candidate and also to test the mechanism for the preference of female voters for a male candidate in the targeted condition compared with the control. A first alternative hypothesis is that, rather than priming group identity, an identity-based message will prime the issue or trait characteristics associated with the message, increasing the likelihood that the issue or traits will be used as a basis for voting for that candidate. For example, Schaffner (2005) finds that in districts where women are a significant portion of the

Table 2. Priming Group-based Identity.

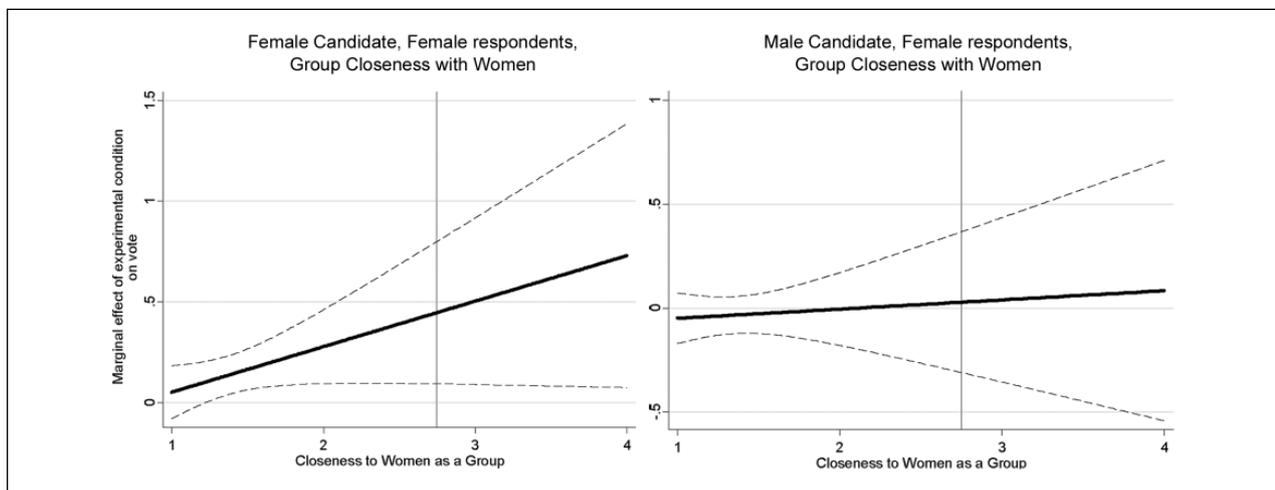
If you were voting in the election today, how likely would you be to vote for Patricia/Tom Johnson? (female respondents only)

	Both candidates	Female candidate	Male candidate
VAW treatment	-0.371 (0.377)	-0.551 (0.550)	-0.161 (0.518)
Closeness to women, as a group	0.196* (0.0759)	0.136 (0.111)	0.260* (0.104)
Closeness to women × VAW treatment	0.170* (0.113)	0.198† (0.116)	0.135 (0.154)
Constant	2.507* (0.245)	2.778* (0.357)	2.222* (0.337)
N	506	258	248
R ²	0.065	0.038	0.104

Source. Knowledge Networks Study.

See the online appendix for sampling design and survey methodology. Given that the dependent variable is a 5-point scale, ordinal logit used in all estimations; significance and coefficient direction are maintained when models are replicated with ordinary least squares regression. Standard errors in parentheses. VAW = violence against women.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$, one-tailed test.

**Figure 1.** Marginal effects of closeness with women × VAW treatment on the vote among female respondents.

Source. Knowledge Networks Study.

Using ordered logit, we estimate models predicting the vote likelihood for the candidate. Independent variables include the VAW treatment (with the transportation as the baseline condition), closeness to women as a group, and an interaction between the VAW treatment and closeness to women as a group. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals. Effect estimated using `grr` command in STATA. Male and female candidates estimated separately. VAW = violence against women.

electorate, candidates emphasize women's issues, which then in turn improves the likelihood that female voters use women's issues in candidate choices.

We asked the respondents, "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. For each problem below, indicate whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount." The treatment increased women's interest in funding VAW programs ($M = 1.38$; control $M = 1.49$, $p < .05$, one-tailed test). The treatment or control does not change importance of transportation funding (treatment $M = 1.44$; control $M = 1.53$, n.s., ANOVA test). Given the connection between discussion of an issue and perceptions that the candidate can handle that issue (Petrocik 1996), we also asked, "How well would you say Patricia/Tom Johnson

would handle the following issues?" with the policy areas of VAW and transportation. Women in the treatment condition considered Patricia Johnson more capable of handling VAW ($M = 3.58$) than did women in the control condition ($M = 2.56$, $p < .01$, one-tailed ANOVA test), while the control condition led female respondents to view Patricia as more capable of handling transportation (3.31) issues compared with the treatment ($M = 2.59$, $p < .01$, one-tailed ANOVA test). We see very similar responses to Tom Johnson's appeals (handle VAW treatment $M = 3.63$, transportation control = 2.26; $p < .01$, one-tailed ANOVA test).

We evaluate the priming models using ordered logit with likelihood of voting as our dependent variable. We control for party identification, given its relationship with attitudes about government spending. As displayed in the

Table 3. Priming Policy Preferences/Ability to Handle a Policy.

If you were voting in the election today, how likely would you be to vote for Patricia/Tom Johnson? (female respondents only)				
	Female candidate	Male candidate	Female candidate	Male candidate
VAW treatment	0.318 (0.333)	0.621 (0.344)	-1.393* (0.514)	-0.0380 (0.512)
Personal preference for spending on VAW	-0.377 (0.322)	0.0347 (0.324)		
Preference × VAW treatment	-0.159 (0.435)	-0.374 (0.439)		
Candidate can handle VAW			0.364* (0.180)	0.474* (0.208)
Handle VAW × treatment			0.784* (0.310)	0.0667 (0.320)
Party ID	0.0587 (0.0559)	-0.0225 (0.0569)	0.0478 (0.0556)	-0.0164 (0.0570)
_cut1	-2.623* (1.094)	-1.985* (0.881)	-4.736* (1.406)	-1.580 (0.904)
_cut2	-1.061 (1.063)	-0.717 (0.858)	-3.179* (1.370)	-0.283 (0.888)
_cut3	0.977 (1.061)	1.458 (0.864)	-1.048 (1.357)	1.914* (0.902)
_cut4	2.891* (1.082)	3.696* (0.897)	0.953 (1.365)	4.179* (0.932)
N	260	256	253	248
R ²	0.013	0.015	0.048	0.046

Source. Knowledge Networks Study.

Dependent variable is a 5-point scale; therefore, ordinal logit was used in all estimations. Significance and coefficient direction are maintained when models are replicated with ordinary least squares regression. Standard errors in parentheses. Party ID is coded so that higher values are more Republican. VAW = violence against women.

* $p < .05$.

first column of results in Table 3, neither concern about VAW nor the interaction between issue concern and treatment are significant for the targeted appeal from the female candidate, thereby ruling this out as an alternate mechanism to identity priming. We find similar null results for the targeted appeal from the male candidate in the second column.

We present the results of priming the candidate's ability to handle an issue in the third and fourth column in Table 3. Participants' perception of Johnson's ability to handle VAW has a positive, significant, direct effect on vote preference, and a priming effect (interacted with the treatment), for the female candidate. The same is not true for the male candidate, where the ability to handle VAW has a direct effect, but no priming effect, as the interaction between the treatment and the ability to handle VAW is insignificant.

A final alternative possibility for the mechanism is that the ads will prime candidate traits, including compassion and leadership. Those in the treatment condition express higher evaluations of perceptions of compassion (treatment: $M = 3.30$; control $M = 2.74$, $p > .00$, one-tailed

ANOVA test) and assessments of leadership (treatment $M = 3.13$; control $M = 3.00$, $p < .05$, one-tailed test, ANOVA). However, we find no priming effects; the interaction of the treatment and the trait is insignificant for both compassion and leadership (see the online appendix). Thus far, we have demonstrated that, among female respondents, an identity-targeted message primes group membership and perceptions of candidate capability, but only when the message comes from a female candidate.

Overall Model

To evaluate whether the identity priming effect among women is significant after controlling for candidate capability and traits, we regress the vote variable onto the treatment, group identity, the interaction of the treatment with group identity, the ability to handle VAW, and perceptions of the candidate's compassion and leadership using ordered logit; the results are presented in Table 4. We find that group identity priming continues to play a significant role in voting for the female candidate, even when controlling for perceptions of the candidate's traits

Table 4. Priming Group Identity Model, Including Group, Issue, and Trait Evaluations.

If you were voting in the election today, how likely would you be to vote for Patricia/Tom Johnson? (female respondents only)		
	Female candidate	Male candidate
VAW treatment	-1.079* (0.505)	-0.473 (0.492)
Closeness to women as a group	-0.314 (0.280)	0.0316 (0.272)
Closeness to women × VAW treatment	0.690* (0.350)	0.140 (0.344)
Candidate's ability to handle VAW	0.242 (0.210)	0.103 (0.207)
Evaluation of candidate as a strong leader	0.617* (0.226)	1.159* (0.256)
Evaluation of candidate as compassionate	0.957* (0.276)	0.325 (0.275)
_cut1	-0.708 (1.900)	1.106 (1.313)
_cut2	0.779 (1.884)	2.368 (1.316)
_cut3	2.996 (1.894)	4.769* (1.343)
_cut4	5.081* (1.914)	7.346* (1.388)
N	239	229
R ²	0.280	0.251

Source. Knowledge Networks Study.

Baseline is the control (transportation) treatment. Dependent variable is a 5-point scale, therefore ordinal logit was used in all estimations; significance and coefficient direction are maintained when models are replicated with ordinary least squares regression. Standard errors in parentheses. VAW = violence against women

* $p < .05$.

and ability to handle VAW. Neither the significance nor the direction of the coefficients changes with the inclusion of party identification in the model.

For the male candidate, the targeted ad still does not prime identity; indeed, the leadership evaluation is the only significant variable. Interestingly, the ad increases evaluations of leadership for the male candidate to the point where female respondents react equally well to appeals from both male and female candidates, albeit through alternative mechanisms. The male candidate's identity-targeted treatment produces larger changes in perceptions of candidate traits among female respondents. Specifically, they rated the male candidate with the identity-targeted ad as higher in perceptions of compassion (treatment $M = 3.29$; control = 2.64, $p > .00$, one-tailed test, ANOVA) and leadership (treatment $M = 3.10$; control = 2.88, $p > .01$, one-tailed test, ANOVA). We should note that some of the differences are larger for the male candidate because he is evaluated less positively than the female in the control condition. In sum, this suggests that the mechanism for the male candidate's success is persuasion on leadership traits among female voters, rather than priming identity or priming the issues in the ad, the alternate specifications that we considered.

Replication

We replicated the study through mTurk, using the same treatments but only a female candidate and female respondents to further evaluate the causal mechanisms. Those in the identity-based treatment express a significantly higher likelihood of voting for the female candidate ($M = 3.78$) compared with those in the issue-based control ($M = 3.34$, $p < .01$, one-tailed test). The interaction of treatment and closeness with women as a group is significant and positive, while neither variable is significant on its own (see Table 5). Thus, we find that (again) the identity-targeted appeal primes group identity, which results in increased support for the female candidate. These results stand up to the addition of a variety of controls, including perceptions of the candidate's traits and ability to handle VAW (see the online appendix).

Out-Group Response

Our initial speculation was that identity-targeted messages would have a negative effect on men. However, male respondents exhibit little evidence of backlash

Table 5. Priming Group Identity Model—Replication with MTurk Respondents.

If you were voting in the election today, how likely would you be to vote for Patricia Johnson? (female candidate and female respondents only)	
VAW treatment	-4.327 [†] (2.424)
Closeness with women as a group	0.208 (0.396)
Closeness with women as a group × VAW treatment	1.629* (0.719)
Party ID	-0.0658 (0.119)
_cut1	-2.471 (1.527)
_cut2	-1.061 (1.469)
_cut3	0.447 (1.464)
_cut4	3.607* (1.519)
N	105
Pseudo R ²	0.07

Source. MTurk Study. Baseline is the Control (Transportation). Dependent variable is a 5-point scale, therefore ordinal logit was used in all estimations; significance and coefficient direction are maintained when models are replicated with ordinary least squares regression. Standard errors in parentheses. Party ID scaled so that higher values are more Republican. VAW = violence against women $p < .10$. * $p < .05$.

against a candidate using identity-based targeting. As Figure 2 demonstrates, we find no evidence that the identity-based treatment from either the male or the female candidate causes male respondents to reduce their likelihood of voting for the candidate. In the control condition with a female candidate, male respondents indicate the lowest level of support ($M = 2.92$); in comparison, the targeted message significantly increases support for the female candidate ($M = 3.21$, $p < .0234$, two-tailed test). The male candidate's ads were interchangeable in their effect on the vote, with equal responses to either the transportation ($M = 3.12$) or the identity-targeted message ($M = 3.11$, n.s.). In sum, we find no support for any direct backlash effect on candidate support from the targeted appeals.

As an additional way to investigate backlash, we asked the respondents to evaluate whether women had too much, the right amount, or not enough influence in American life and politics. The attitudes about women's influence in the treatment condition ($M = 1.68$) from the female candidate was indistinguishable from the control ($M = 1.61$, n.s.). When coming from a male candidate, the treatment ($M = 1.8$) does slightly elevate concern about women's influence among men when compared with the control ($M = 1.66$, $p < .162$ one-tailed ANOVA test). We

see no evidence of backlash in the group closeness measures: men's reported closeness with women increases slightly when seeing an identity-based targeted ad from a female candidate (treatment $M = 2.79$; control $M = 2.69$, n.s.), while closeness to men as a group remains the same. With a male candidate, closeness to women increases significantly (treatment $M = 2.6$; control $M = 2.9$, $p < .002$, one-tailed ANOVA test) and closeness to men decreases (treatment $M = 2.88$; control $M = 3.1$, $p < .01$, one-tailed ANOVA test). Attitudes about women's power and group closeness with women and men do not influence men's likelihood of voting for either candidate. It may be that the particular subject matter of the appeal (domestic violence) is driving these responses by male respondents, and a different subject matter of targeted appeals (such as women's reproductive rights or equal pay) would change attitudes toward women and (thus) candidate evaluations.

As with the female respondents, we evaluate alternate specifications and find that the targeted ad increases evaluations of leadership, compassion, and the ability to handle VAW policies for both male and female candidates. When vote is regressed on these variables, evaluations of leadership remain significant and positive, but we find no evidence of priming effects (see the online appendix for the full results). Indeed, we find that men's evaluations of the female candidate's leadership—increased by the ad—result in a higher overall likelihood of vote. Thus, men's responses to targeted ads from female candidates operate via the same mechanism (persuasion on traits) as the female response to such an ad from a male candidate.

Conclusion

Campaigns use identity-based targeted ads in a strategic attempt to gain votes from members of a particular group by symbolic appeals to that group. Our goal in this paper was to understand how these messages targeted toward women from both female and male candidates affected the ingredients of vote choice among both the targets of said messages (women) and the unintended recipients (men). We speculated that these ads would increase women's votes for the candidate who employed them and, importantly, that the mechanism behind their success would be priming identity. We confirmed that identity priming, more than any other explanation considered, explained the targeted ad's effects. The responses of women to female candidates stand out as activating identity to create a positive response.

In a sense, this finding that only female candidates can prime identity is closer to the normative ideal for symbolic or descriptive representation. From a descriptive representation standpoint, members of a unique minority group, such as women, should have an interest in having

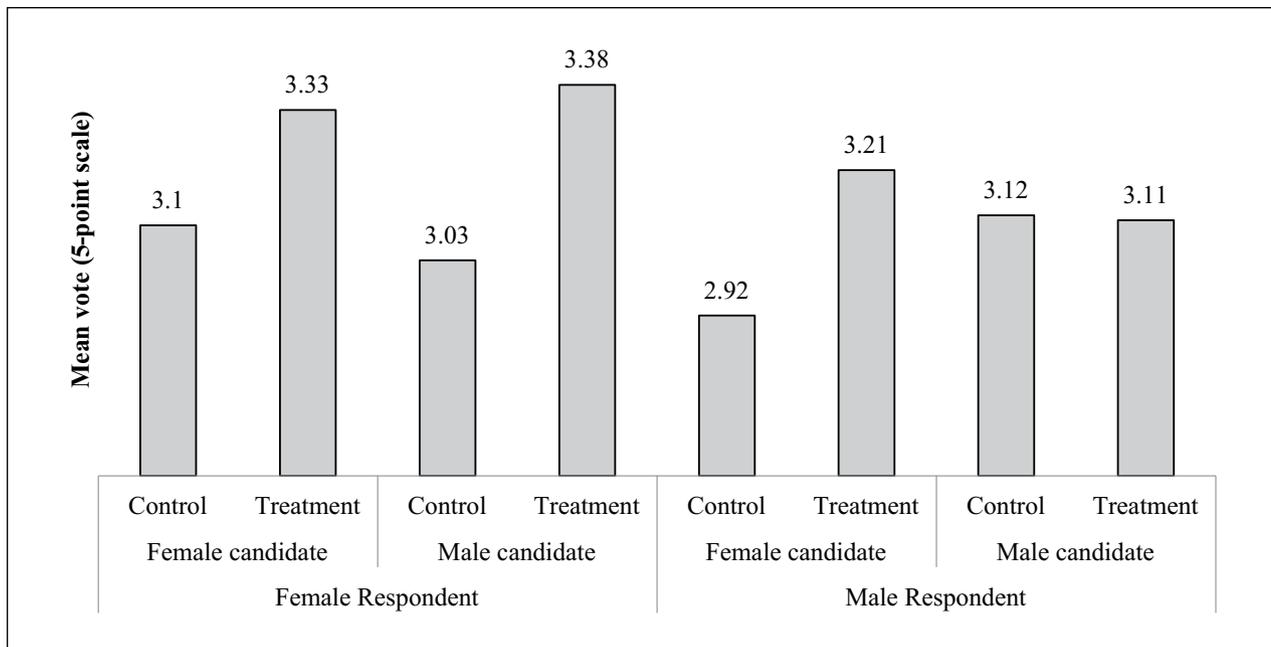


Figure 2. Candidate gender, respondent gender, targeted ads, and the vote.

Source. Knowledge Networks Study.

Figure shows the *mean* vote for Tom/Patricia Johnson on a 5-point scale across violence against women treatment and transportation control conditions.

a representative who “looks like” them in office (Mansbridge 1999; Pitkin [1967] 1972). Female candidates should be able to attract the attention of female voters because of their shared identity and interests, which presents an opportunity to encourage women to vote for women. The targeted messages from the female candidate, we find, are doing just this, whereas those from the male candidate are effective in a different way.

The success of identity-based appeals from male candidates offers a particularly interesting finding. The frequency with which male candidates present targeted messages to women may explain this result. Even so, this suggests some consequences for descriptive representation in that candidates can claim solidarity with an identity that is not his or her own. For example, a male candidate—George W. Bush—declared that he “stood for” women, despite the fact that he does not share this identity. A male candidate can stake a claim to represent women, even when descriptive representation does not exist. In instances such as this one, a candidate’s appeal is based on acting in the interest of an out-group and, consequently, identity-based targeting could influence voters toward choosing that candidate even if that candidate would not be a good representative for the group. Although voters with high levels of information about the candidate would likely be unaffected (Zaller 1992), uninformed voters might be influenced by such targeting, even if they disagree with the issue positions of the candidate. In this way, they might choose a representative because of this symbolic appeal to women, rather than on

the normatively desirable factors of issues positions (Lau and Redlawsk 1997). Interestingly, we find that the appeals are effective for respondents across levels of education, suggesting that in a low information environment, they are universally effective. Future research could test these claims and the implications of identity-based targeting for descriptive representation; this study is a unique step in understanding this relationship.

Unexpectedly, we found that men did not exhibit a backlash effect to the appeal aimed at women. We attribute this finding to two possible causes: the relationship between men and women in society and the subject of our appeal. Men, after all, are integrated with the “opposing” group (women) and therefore may not feel as much animosity or backlash toward women when seeing targeting toward them. Different, perhaps more threatening, groups could produce a more animated negative response (Hersh and Schaffner 2013). It is also possible that presenting women as victims in the appeal through the use of domestic violence content also reduced the threat associated with the ad. Additional research that focuses on women friendly policies that may be threatening to men (such as decreasing the gender pay gap or affirmative action policies for women) could potentially produce a level of backlash. It is also possible that evaluating beliefs about modern sexism or the legitimacy of women’s experiences of discrimination would reveal diversity in men’s reactions to campaign ads targeting women regardless of the particular issue used (Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015).

As we discuss in the introduction, women represent a least-case scenario group for an effective campaign of targeted appeals, given that they have less cohesive group interests compared with other groups. Indeed, racial and ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities might have better defined interests. Because women represent a least-likely scenario, our significant results and the replication of our findings leads us to be even more confident in our conclusions as to how targeted appeals affect women.

Our research also provides a framework and theory for studying the effects of any identity-based targeting. Racial and ethnic groups such as blacks or Hispanics as well as groups based on sexual identity such as gays may be more likely to be concentrated in particular geographic areas. This could make them easier to target with messages that are more specific. As these groups are less integrated with the mainstream population (and are often seen as threatening), there could also be more backlash among out-group members who receive messages targeted at these groups. Moreover, groups can be created over the course of the campaign by the media or candidates, such as soccer moms or NASCAR dads. Group-based cues can be aimed at out-group members, such as cueing African American faces to increase fear among whites (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). These attachments—both long-standing and those created over the course of a campaign—have political consequences, such as shared interests and fears and preferences for a “like” group member as well as serving as a key component of vote choice (Conover 1988; Jackson 2011; Miller et al. 1981). The 2012 and 2014 election cycles saw an unprecedented number of political advertisements, with an increasing number of those ads targeted at specific groups. Future research could apply the framework here to different groups to better understand the effects of such targeted messages. It is also possible that changes to the campaign structure would make these results more or less relevant over time.

Given the number and reach of ads targeted at women—from the presidential race down to local elections—it is important to understanding campaign effects and representation to know how, why, and if these ads affect voters. We study an example of gender-based targeting in the form of a website to evaluate the causal mechanism behind how this type of ad serves to prime identity and influence vote choice. The success of gender-based targeting through different mechanisms depending on candidate gender suggests that we may see even more identity-targeted advertisements, particularly given their effectiveness in eliciting vote support for a candidate, regardless of whether the candidate belongs to the group. This conclusion has significant implications for descriptive and substantive representation.

Acknowledgment

The authors thank Erin Cassese, Don Green, Cherie Maestas, Heather Ondercin, Ken Rogerson, Kira Sanbonmatsu, Virginia Sapiro, Jennie Sweet-Cushman, and the Gender and Political Psychology Writing Group for their comments on the paper.

Authors' Note

Data are available from <http://www.tessexperiments.org/previousstudies.html>. Coding, variable construction, and replication files are available from the authors.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The Knowledge Networks experimental data used in this paper were collected by Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences, NSF Grant 0094964, Diana C. Mutz and Arthur Lupia, principal investigators.

Notes

1. Hersh and Schaffner (2013) call these appeals “targeted panders,” but their operationalization—a message that the candidate will “represent [group] in Congress”—suggests the same meaning as identity-based targeting.
2. We chose a male Republican’s targeted messages for our model in an effort to remove partisan concerns from the effects of these targets as much as possible. This is particularly important, given the overlap between “women’s issues” and the Democratic Party (Schneider and Bos 2014).
3. In contrast, Hersh and Schaffner’s (2013) targeted message includes the candidate’s pledge, “To represent the interests of [Latinos] in Congress,” and the control changes to “middle class/constituents.” As the authors acknowledge, use of the middle class could still have an identity function. We argue that a true control condition is a message that does not invoke any group, as even “constituents” could be interpreted as an identity group. This may explain why Hersh and Schaffner (2013) find few effects.
4. We find that the treatment increases closeness with women as a group, regardless of whether the candidate is male (treatment $M = 3.39$; control $M = 3.15$, $p < .0125$) or female (treatment $M = 3.32$; control $M = 3.12$, $p < .03$).

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