

Political candidates can successfully use targeted appeals to increase support from female voters.

Recent presidential and congressional elections have featured growing appeals to specific groups, including women. But are these marketing techniques actually effective at persuading women voters? In new research using experiments which test how voters respond to such appeals, [Mirya R Holman](#), [Monica C Schneider](#) and [Kristin Pondel](#) find that such identity-based targeting makes it more likely that both men and women will vote for a certain candidate. Appeals by women candidates, they write, are also more likely to be effective with women voters, as they activate group identity among women.



During the 2012 election, one of Barack Obama’s often-used presidential campaign videos featured [his wife Michelle speaking directly to 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. Beginning in the early 2000s and continuing through the 2014 elections, the U.S. has seen a marked increase in campaigns’ use of marketing techniques (called micro-targeting) [aimed at specific groups](#), including women. However, it is unclear whether or why these ads are effective in persuading voters.



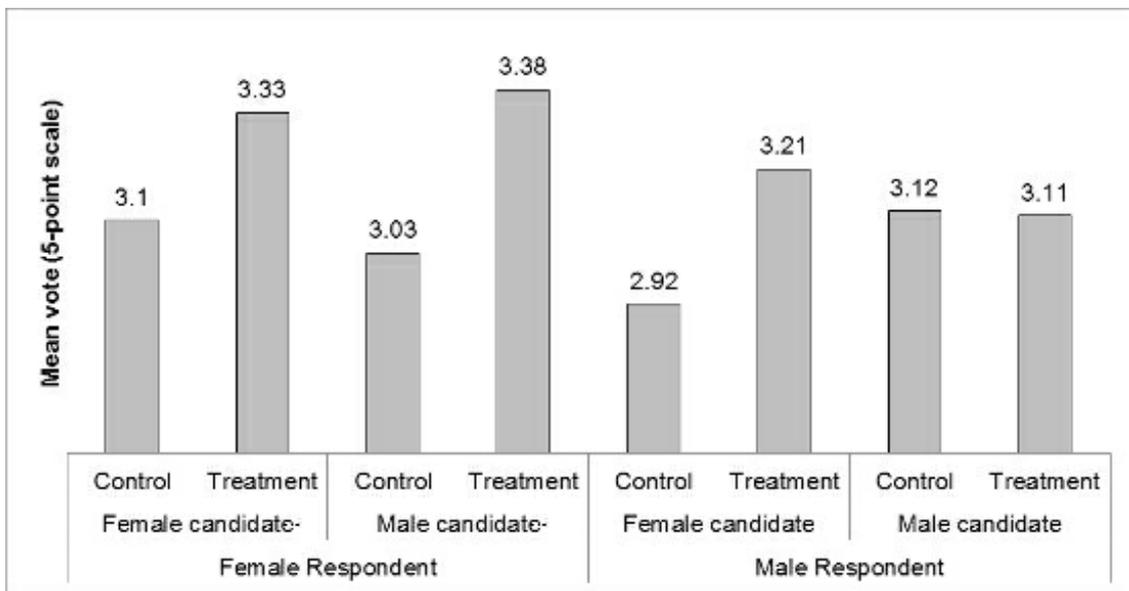
Political campaigns increasingly know more about potential voters, including their characteristics and interests. Candidates often use information from voter databases to attempt to [persuade cross-pressured partisans](#)—those who disagree with their party on one or more issues – using those specific issues of disagreement, such as stem cell research or abortion. As campaigns intensify their efforts to attract voters, they have also become increasingly reliant on [consumer-marketing techniques](#), including seeking out smaller groups of voters to send individualized messages.



In new [research](#), we investigate the effects of a special subset of these individualized messages: *identity-based targeting* or a candidate’s efforts to appeal to voters’ emotional attachments to a particular social group that has political meaning. We focus on appeals to female voters in the American electoral context for several reasons: 1) women make up over half of the voting electorate and are thus an important group for understanding campaign dynamics; 2) gender identity has the potential to influence the vote; 3) women’s voting patterns are distinct from men’s; 4) studying women is normatively important, as women are [descriptively underrepresented throughout American politics](#). Therefore, attempts by campaigns to woo female voters can have implications for [women’s substantive and descriptive representation](#).

Our research uses an experiment to examine how women and men respond to these identity appeals. Half of our respondents viewed a website that was not targeted to female voters (our control condition, featuring a message about transportation) and the other half viewed a one that was targeted towards women (our identity appeal condition, featuring a message about violence against women). When we compare how participants reacted, we find that both male and female candidates benefit from targeting women in their campaigns. In fact, compared to the control condition, identity ads increase women’s votes for the candidate who employed them. Men respond positively to identity-based ads from female candidates and are unaffected by their appeals by male candidates.

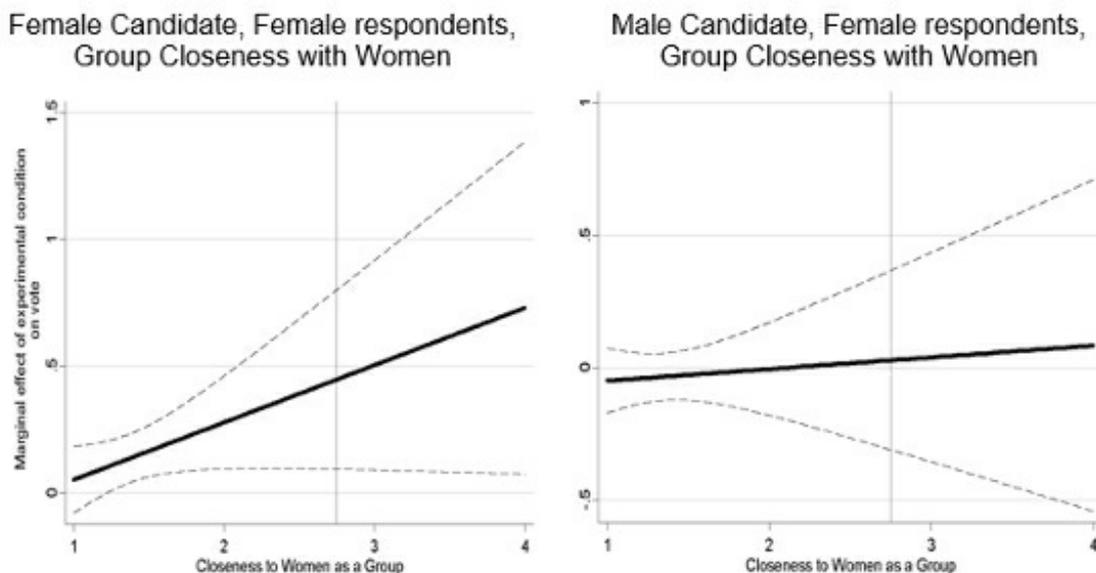
Figure 1 – Candidate gender, respondent gender, targeted ads, and the vote



Note: Figure shows the mean vote for Male/Female candidate on five-point scale across Treatment and Control conditions.

We also investigate *why* these appeals achieve success by looking at how women react. We find that even though female and male candidates are equally successful in using identity appeals, the reason that women change their votes differ. When a female candidate uses an identity appeal, it works by activating group identity with women – the appeals make women feel closer to other women. Figure 2 shows the how the effect of the treatment on the vote (y-axis) increases with the level of group closeness (x-axis). This occurs *only* for the female candidate (left graph) – identity appeals from the male candidates do no similarly increase group closeness (right graph).

Figure 2 – Effects of Closeness on the Vote among Female Respondents



Note: Source: Knowledge Networks Study. Effect estimated using `ginter` command in STATA. Male and female candidates estimated separately.

The identity appeals from male candidates do not increase group-ties among women. They do, however, increase the view that the male candidate is a strong leader and compassionate, which are important considerations in the vote decision.

The 2012 and 2014 election cycles saw an unprecedented number of political advertisements, with an increasing number of those ads targeted at specific groups of people. All signs point to a greater reliance on micro-targeting in the 2016 election. Our results suggest that appealing to female voters based on an identity-based appeal is effective to the extent that the appeal contains substantive information about the candidate's stances on issues of importance to a particular group. Future research could evaluate whether empty identity appeals – those that aim to target a group's identity without substantive discussions – are also successful in changing the minds of voters. Candidates outside the American context are [increasingly using micro-targeting](#) to reach voters – evaluating how these appeals work in different political systems might lend further insight into their effectiveness.

Given the number and reach of ads targeted to 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. The success of identity targeting 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 article is based on the paper, '[Gender Targeting in Political Advertisements](#)', in *Political Research Quarterly*, which will be free to read until November 30th, 2015.*

Featured [image](#) credit: [Bogdan Suditu](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-2.0](#))

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1LHnzmw>

About the authors

Mirya R Holman – *Tulane University*

Mirya R Holman is Assistant Professor at Tulane University. She conducts research on political ambition, gender stereotypes, and urban politics and is the author of *Women in Politics in the American City* (Temple University Press, 2014).



Monica C Schneider – *Miami University in Oxford, Ohio*

Monica C Schneider is Associate Professor of Political Science at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Her research and teaching interests include political psychology, stereotypes of female candidates, and women's political ambition.



Kristin Pondel – *Miami University*

Kristin Pondel is a Research Director at GfK. She earned her BA in Political Science from Miami University in 2009.



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP