The Effects of Targeting Gender by Political Campaigns

Campaigns produced hundreds of appeals aimed at women in the last several election cycles (Christensen 2012; Wilson 2012). George W. Bush sent his wife Laura to promote a “W Stands for Women” campaign and Michelle Obama entreated on her husband’s behalf that “our votes” will be important in November are a few examples of such appeals. We define these messages as identity-based targeting or narrowcasting a message from a member of an identity group that uses symbolic appeals to promote a sense of shared group identity. The increase in campaigns’ use of identity-based targeting has provided fodder for journalists (Brennan 2012) and election analysts (Issenberg 2012) alike, but academics have yet to investigate how these messages affect voters. We propose to test the notion that identity-based targeting will affect vote choice through priming group membership. In particular, we focus on appeals from female candidates to women, as women have particular political interests (Sapiro 1981), shared fears and preferences for a ‘like’ group member (Conover 1988; Miller et al. 1981; Gurin et al. 1980), and gender plays an important role in political decisions such as vote choice (e.g., Dolan 1998).

Campaigns promote particular issues in an attempt to solidify their base, or alter the vote choice of partisans who disagree with their party on that issue (Hillygus and Shields 2008) or swing voters (Lovett and Peress 2010). With improved marketing techniques, candidates can narrowcast messages to voters aimed at gaining a group’s support through customized media efforts such as direct mail, e-mail, or television ads on certain channels (Hillygus and Shields 2008; Franz and Ridout 2010). The targeting of interest here is not simply an appeal based on issues that a group favors, but a message to a group of voters that emphasizes an emotional attachment to that group. Priming identity is the mechanism for altering vote choice. We contend that identity-based messages from female candidates targeted to women will increase the likelihood of women voting for the candidate. Such messages change vote choice by priming identity, where priming is defined as “systematic
increases in the weights voters attach to particular political considerations” (Bartels 2006). Social identity theory suggests that having their group clearly defined by campaign rhetoric from a member of the group will direct people towards feelings of group consciousness. Identity-based targeting provides the salience and clarity of a group cue (Conover 1988) and encourages the recipient to increase the weight attached to identity in expressing preferences for candidates.

*Identity targeted appeals only prime identity when they are from an in-group member.* Group consciousness theory posits the necessity of identity and group orientation for group membership to promote political attitude change (Conover 1988). Research indicates that the source of a message can influence its effectiveness (e.g., Druckman 2001) and that messages from an ingroup member are more persuasive than those from an outgroup member, particularly with a relevant issue (Mackie et al. 1990; Mackie et al. 1992). Indeed, black respondents were more likely to agree with a statement attributed to in-group member Jesse Jackson than to George H.W. Bush (Kuklinski and Hurley 1994). Positive messages are sometimes found to be effective overall, but are more effective coming from ingroup sources (Ellemers et al. 2004); others find messages from outgroups evoking a common ingroup identity lacked persuasion (Rutchick and Eccleston 2010). We posit that an identity-based message from a female candidate primes group identity among women, when compared to an untargeted message from a female candidate or a targeted message from a male candidate. An identity-based message from a male candidate may promote issue-based attitude change but will not prime identity; the effect of an identity-based message from a female candidate will be more effective than the same message from a male candidate, but only among female voters.

*Targeted appeals may influence unintended recipients.* Men can easily be exposed to targeting aimed at women. We argue that the ads promoting women’s identity will cue feelings of threat among male respondents, especially if the message is from a woman. 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 outgroup members (Forehand et al 2002).

Alternate Hypothesis. Many identity-based appeals include issue-related messages in addition to identity
appeals and, therefore, might simply prime issue or image characteristics used in the ad, rather than
identity. For instance, Schaffner (2005) finds that when candidates emphasize women’s issues, these
issues were weighted more heavily in female voters’ choices, resulting in an increase in votes for that
candidate (see also Herrnson et al. 2003). Messages targeting specific groups from outgroup
members may inspire support for the candidate sending the message because of the issues in the ad,
but will not prime identity. While we test this possibility, evidence suggests that issues alone are not
the key ingredient of successful targeting. Indeed, appeals from George W. Bush based only on
women’s issues did not generate changes in women’s voting patterns (Hutchings et al. 2004).

Additional Considerations. Identity-based targeting might persuade voters to change their evaluations of
the candidate sending the message (Bartels 2006; Kinder 2003; Franz and Ridout 2010). For
instance, a voter encountering the “W Stands for Women” campaign might evaluate Bush more
highly on important image characteristics, such as leadership and empathy (Merolla and Zechmeister
2009; Funk 1999). Said voter might change her mind as to how competent Bush is at handling issues
and perhaps even see him as more liberal. Thus, in our model of identity priming, we also take into
account that identity-based messages can alter the other ingredients of vote choice.

Pilot test. In our pilot test of the proposed effects, female respondents from MTurk viewed a page
from the website of “Congresswoman Patricia Johnson” that contained either an appeal to women
(treatment) or a discussion of transportation (control). The symbolic components of the treatment
were a “Women for Johnson” headline, a photo of women, and an emphasis on the candidate’s
experience with and commitment to preventing domestic violence. Those in the treatment (an
identity-based appeal) were significantly more likely to vote for Johnson on a 5-point scale (X =
3.78, SD = 0.86) compared to those in the control (X = 3.34, SD = 0.96). Regressing the vote variable on a ‘closeness with women’ scale, the interaction between the treatment and closeness, and party identification as a control variable yielded a significant coefficient on the interaction between the treatment and the closeness variable, providing support for the identity priming hypothesis. The interaction remains significant with the inclusion of respondents’ perceptions of the candidate’s characteristics and abilities (see Table 1). We find no evidence that the treatment primed respondents’ views on the issue in the ad or the candidate’s capacity to handle the issue in the ad, nor do we find that the appeal primed women’s pay equity – a women’s issue not mentioned in the appeal.

**Study Design.** Our between-subjects 3 (targeting) x2 (respondent gender) factorial design is an extension of the aforementioned pilot test. We manipulate whether the appeal is targeted towards women or a neutral transportation appeal and whether the appeal comes from a female (“Patricia Johnson”) or a male (“Tom Johnson”) candidate. These manipulations create three conditions: 1) identity appeal or threat (a female candidate using a women’s issue), 2) women’s issue appeal or threat (a male candidate using a women’s issue), 3) non-targeted issue appeal (a female or male candidate using a transportation appeal). The identity appeals from female candidates should be most appealing to female respondents and most threatening to males, with weaker responses from both men and women to women’s issue appeals from male candidates. We outline our expectations for support for the candidate in each condition in Figure 1.

We measure our dependent variables post-stimulus (see Appendix) and include overall evaluations of the candidate, vote choice, and feelings towards the candidate. We measure respondents’ perceptions of the candidate’s traits, competency on the manipulated issues, and as well as the

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1 The choice of website content is based on our desire to replicate our pilot study and to maximize external validity; research has found that parties use websites to target content to specific groups (Russmann 2011). Therefore, we propose re-using the altered content from the website of a male Republican Congressional candidate in Pennsylvania.
importance of the manipulated issues and group identity. We also ask about perceptions of group threat to understand if the message threatens men.

**Study Significance.** The effects of identity-based targeting are not broadly understood, despite widespread use by campaigns and attention from the media. This project addresses an important gap in the effects of campaigns on voters and contributes to the discussion of the costs and benefits of descriptive representation (Pitkin 1967; Mansbridge 1999). While members of a minority group like women may have an interest in having a representative who ‘looks like’ them in office, this benefit might not be realized if the candidate ‘uses’ identity to persuade women. In addition, female candidates targeting female voters might increase belief in essentialism, thus reinforcing the idea that only women can represent women (Mansbridge 1999). Targeted messages may also lead to a decline representative’s accountability, particularly in the context of microtargeting (Franz 2013). If these appeals threaten outgroup members, candidates may be limiting their electoral chances by engaging in such actions. Psychologists, political scientists, communication scholars, and campaign practitioners would likely be interested in the results of this study.

**Request and Justification for Survey Lengths and Sample Size.** We are requesting a total of 1000 respondents and 18 lengths: 15 lengths for survey questions and 3 lengths for the website with photo. The request is based on analyses of our pilot test and power analysis, which we performed using two-sample t-tests of differences across vote and leadership evaluations, in which we specified 80% power, alpha=0.05. On average, the calculations suggested an N of 125 subjects per group, assuming balanced groups. From past experiments, we know that we will lose approximately 10% of the respondents due to non-response. Factoring in the loss from non-responses for the 8 experimental conditions, we are requesting the maximum of 1000 for 18 survey lengths.
Table 1: Pilot Test Evidence of Priming and Persuasion

If you were voting in the election today in the election, how likely would you be to vote for Patricia Johnson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>-5.071</td>
<td>(2.838)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness with Women as a Group</td>
<td>-0.328</td>
<td>(0.485)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness with Women as a Group * Treatment</td>
<td>1.669*</td>
<td>(0.845)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
<td>0.112</td>
<td>(0.140)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson Handle VAW</td>
<td>-0.194</td>
<td>(0.443)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson Compassion</td>
<td>0.814+</td>
<td>(0.442)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson Favorability</td>
<td>1.929**</td>
<td>(0.347)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson Feeling Thermometer</td>
<td>0.0197</td>
<td>(0.0149)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_cut1</td>
<td>4.816*</td>
<td>(2.384)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_cut2</td>
<td>8.232**</td>
<td>(2.450)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_cut3</td>
<td>11.23**</td>
<td>(2.604)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_cut4</td>
<td>16.48**</td>
<td>(2.946)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>105</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.406</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ordinal logit used in all estimations
Standard errors in parentheses
+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$
Figure 1: Estimated support of candidate by condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Estimated Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity Appeal (Identity x F candidate x F resp)</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Threat (Identity x F candidate x M resp)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's Issue appeal (Identity x M candidate x F resp)</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's Issue threat (Identity x M candidate x M resp)</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue appeal (No Identity x Either candidate x Either resp)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five point vote scale; 1 = Extremely unlikely to vote for candidate; 5 = Extremely likely to vote for candidate

Note: Estimates based on pilot responses
Survey:

A. Overall Candidate Evaluations (2 questions)

1. If you were voting in the election today in the election, how likely would you be to vote for Patricia Johnson/Tom Johnson?
   1. Extremely unlikely to vote for Patricia Johnson/Tom Johnson
   2. Somewhat unlikely to vote for Patricia Johnson/Tom Johnson
   3. Neither likely nor unlikely to vote for Patricia Johnson/Tom Johnson
   4. Somewhat likely to vote for Patricia Johnson/Tom Johnson
   5. Extremely likely to vote for Patricia Johnson/Tom Johnson

2. How do you generally feel towards Patricia Johnson/Tom Johnson - do you feel favorable or unfavorable towards her/him?
   1. Very unfavorable
   2. Unfavorable
   3. Slightly unfavorable
   4. Neutral
   5. Slightly favorable
   6. Favorable
   7. Very favorable

B. Candidate Trait Characteristics (3 Questions)

Based on what you know about Patricia Johnson/Tom Johnson, how well does each of the following adjectives describe her/him?

3. Compassionate
   1. Not well at all
   2. Not very well
   3. Somewhat well
   4. Very well

4. Strong Leader
   1. Not well at all
   2. Not very well
   3. Somewhat well
   4. Very well

C. Perceptions of Candidate’s Competence on Issues and Ideology (3 questions)

Using the same scale, how well would you say Patricia Johnson/Tom Johnson would handle the following issues?

5. Transportation
   1. Not well at all
   2. Not very well
   3. Somewhat well
4. Very well

6. Violence against women
   1. Not well at all
   2. Not very well
   3. Somewhat well
   4. Very well

7. Support for female small business owners
   1. Not well at all
   2. Not very well
   3. Somewhat well
   4. Very well

8. What would you say is Patricia Johnson’s/Tom Johnson’s party affiliation?
   1. Strong Republican
   2. Not strong Republican
   3. Leans Republican
   4. Undecided/Independent/Other
   5. Leans Democrat
   6. Not strong Democrat
   7. Strong Democrat

D. Group identity (2 questions)

Below you will find a list of groups. Please read over this list and indicate how close you feel towards the group. By ‘close,’ we mean the people who are most like you in their ideas and interests and feelings.

9. Men
   1. Not close at all
   2. Not very close
   3. Somewhat close
   4. Very close

10. Women
    1. Not close at all
    2. Not very close
    3. Somewhat close
    4. Very close

E. Group Threat (2 questions)

Some people think that certain groups have too much influence in American life and politics, while others feel that they don’t have enough influence. For the following group, please indicate if you think that the group has not enough influence, the right amount of influence, or too much influence.

11. Women
1. Not enough influence
2. The right amount of influence
3. Too much influence

F. **Attitudes towards issue (3 questions)**

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.

12. Violence against women
   1. Too little
   2. About right
   3. Too much

13. Transportation and infrastructure
   1. Too little
   2. About right
   3. Too much

14. Support for female small business owners
   1. Too little
   2. About right
   3. Too much

G. **Manipulation check (1 question)**

15. What issue was discussed on the website?
   1. Transportation
   2. Violence against women
   3. Health care
Figures:

Figure 1: Treatment website targeted towards women from female candidate

Instructions: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Take a minute to look over a website from the Patricia Johnson/Tom Johnson campaign in <insert respondent’s home state>. After looking at the website, please do your best to read directions and answer all of the questions that follow. You may, however, skip any questions for any reason. Your survey responses are anonymous so please answer as honestly as possible.

Note: content is changed between male/female candidates in the following ways: first name of candidate, gendered pronouns and descriptors, and the picture (male candidate features of a photo of a man with two women).
Figure 2: Control website with transportation message from female candidate

Instructions: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Take a minute to look over a website from the Patricia Johnson/Tom Johnson campaign in <insert respondent’s home state>. After looking at the website, please do your best to read directions and answer all of the questions that follow. You may, however, skip any questions for any reason. Your survey responses are anonymous so please answer as honestly as possible.

Note: content is changed between male/female candidates in the following ways: first name of candidate and gendered pronouns and descriptors.
Works Cited


