Political Communication

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In a Different Voice? Explaining the Use of Men and Women As Voice-Over Announcers in Political Advertising

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We draw on a comprehensive database of American political advertising and television audience profile data to investigate the ways in which gender influences choices about the use of voice-overs in political advertising. Our findings suggest that although men voice the vast majority of political ads, campaigns do strategically choose the sex of the voice-over announcer and that it systematically varies with candidate characteristics, ad tone, and, to a lesser extent, issues. Moreover, using survey data, we show that the choice of voice-over influences the perceived credibility of the ad.

Keywords political advertising, gender, campaigns

Modern political campaigns are increasingly sophisticated operations, and little is left to chance. Even minor decisions are made after careful study by experienced campaign professionals. This extends to decisions about political advertising, including what type of content to air, when and where. Indeed, the development of a political ad can be a lengthy process, one that includes message testing with focus groups, in order to get every last detail right (Johnson, 2001). In short, campaigns' choices about the content of their political ads are strategic, especially in well-financed campaigns for federal office.

One of the choices that campaigns must make is whether to employ a voice-over announcer, and if so, whether that announcer should be a man or a woman. At first blush, that might seem to be a minor choice, but it is one that many campaigns take seriously—and one that is consequential. We will show that the choice of a man or woman to voice an ad varies systematically with several features of the ad and composition of the ad's intended audience. Moreover, using a wealth of survey data collected during the 2012 presidential campaign, we will show that the sex of the voice-over announcer influences perceptions of an ad's credibility, which is a known antecedent of persuasion

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(see also Belch, 1981; Boddewyn & Marton, 1978; Gotlieb & Sarel, 1991; Kelly, 1967; Levine, 1976; Swinyard, 1981).

Yet our research also documents a sizable gender inequality in the packaging of political ads: Ad makers in the United States still prefer men to women as voice-over announcers—and by large margins. However, men are not *always* more credible spokespersons. In fact, we will show that women's voices are more persuasive when the issue is a feminine or non-gendered one.

In the end, we show campaigns strategically choose the sex of the voice-over announcer in their ads and that such decisions depend on candidate characteristics, the tone of the ad, and, to a lesser extent, the gender stereotypes associated with the issues. Moreover, we show that such choices may influence a candidate's chances of success, as the ad's credibility (and therefore its potential persuasiveness) hinges on whether a man or woman is used as announcer. But campaigns could potentially be more persuasive if they were to rely less on men's voices and better target the audience and message they wish to promote.

Advertising and Credibility

A number of classic studies suggest that the key to increasing the persuasive power of a message is increasing the perceived credibility of the speaker (e.g., Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Maddux & Rogers, 1980; Watts & McGuire, 1964). Two commonly identified dimensions of credibility are the trustworthiness of a speaker and that speaker's expertise (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; Dholakia & Sternthall, 1977; Hovland, Janis, Kelley, & Weiss, 1953). Trustworthiness refers to whether the source is unbiased, or, as Pornpitakpan (2004) puts it, "the degree to which an audience perceives the assertions made by the communicator to be ones that the speaker considers valid" (p. 244). Expertise, on the other hand, refers to whether the audience perceives the speaker to have the knowledge to make statements that are correct.

There is little agreement in the literature as to the effects of a speaker's gender on credibility (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Wolin, 2003). For instance, several studies report women are viewed as less credible spokespersons, even when they engage in the same behaviors as men (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Deaux, 1985; Kenton, 1989; Wallston & O'Leary, 1981). For example, women who argue are viewed as less knowledgeable and less credible than men who argue (Bradley, 1981; see also Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O'Barr, 1978; Lakoff, 1975). This may be because women are rated along different dimensions of credibility. Brownlow and Zebrowitz (1990) report, for example, that women were perceived as more trustworthy television commercial spokespersons but as having less expertise. Still other scholars find no significant differences in perceived credibility of men and women spokespersons (Carsky & Zuckerman, 1991; Freiden, 1984).

Although gender stereotypes are usually employed to explain differences in perceptions of credibility between men and women, recent research attributes these differences to the vocal characteristics of a speaker. Credibility varies, for instance, with voice pitch. Research suggests men and women equate lower-pitch voices with more attractive, stronger, and more competent individuals (Klofstad, Anderson, & Peters, 2012; Nass, Moon, & Green,1997; Tigue, Borak, O'Connor, Schandl, & Feinberg, 2011), and these effects extend to vote choice. Klofstad and colleagues (2012) find that both men and women are more likely to vote for men and women candidates with lower voices.

Taken together, these studies suggest that by altering the sex of the voice-over announcer campaigns may be able to alter the perceived credibility of the ad's messenger

and the ad's message, too, given that messenger and message credibility are highly corre-lated (Roberts, 2010). However, it is unlikely that men are *always* perceived to be more credible than women (or vice versa). Instead, campaigns must consider the circumstances under which a man's or woman's voice is likely to be more credible. Existing literature points to four factors that might interact with the speaker's voice to influence an ad's credi-bility: the issue discussed in the advertising, the candidate's party, the candidate's sex, and the audience.

To improve the credibility of their advertising, campaigns may strategically *match* the sex of the voice-over announcer with the sex of the candidate, the gender associations of his or her party, the gender associations of the issue, or the gender composition of the audience.[1] Marketing literature suggests that ad makers generally pursue such a strategy, designing ads so that verbal and nonverbal cues used throughout are consistent (Bartsch, Burnett, Diller, & Rankin-Williams, 2000; Dilevko & Harris, 1997; Misra & Beatty, 1990; Scharrer, Kim, Lin, & Liu, 2006), thus making them more effective. For example, Kanungo and Pang (1973) find that higher evaluations of a product and/or commercial often result when the gender image of a product is consistent with the sex of the presenter; for example, when men introduce (or are featured using) masculine products such as cars and women introduce (or are featured using) feminine products such as sofas. More recent work on the impact of non-human spokes-characters also indicates that a viewer is more likely to buy a product when the gender of the spokes-character matches that of the product; for example, a male selling a golf ball and a female selling a vacuum (Peirce, 2001).

One reason gender continuity may work is because men are seen as more credible spokespeople for masculine products and vice versa. Presumably, the man has personal experience using the lawn mower or car wax, while the woman has more personal expe-rience using the dish soap or vacuum cleaner. Such expertise, one of the dimensions of credibility, is increased when the gender associations of the product and the sex of the announcer or spokesperson are congruent. As Whipple and McManamon (2002) conclude in their study on the use of male and female voices in commercials, female announcers "represent presenters who, as women, are more credible experts to convey the image of 'the most sensuous perfume on earth'" (p. 89; i.e., to sell a female-gendered product).[2]

A separate body of literature focuses on the similarity between the source of a message and the message receiver. Research on homophily—the degree to which a receiver ascribes similarity to the message source—suggests that similarity with the source positively affects receiver persuasion (McCroskey, Hamilton, & Weiner, 1974; Wheeless, 1974). Underlying this receiver-source relationship is the idea that individuals are more attracted to individuals that are like them (Bailenson, Beall, Loomis, Blascovich, & Turk, 2004). In other words, men feel affinity for other men while women feel affinity for other women (O'Keefe, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2004).

In this research, we extend the idea that "continuity sells" to the political realm. We suggest that candidates may experience electoral advantages by manipulating the "fit" between the sex of the voice-over and other components of the ad, including issue, party, and candidate sex. Such manipulations may increase the credibility of the messenger, and in consequence, the credibility—and persuasive power—of the advertisement.

Issues

Certain issues commonly talked about in politics have gendered associations (Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes, 2003; Strach & Sapiro, 2011). Although there is not one accepted way to measure gendered issues, conventional scholarship generally labels women's traditional

concerns like education, child care, health care, and reproductive rights as "women's issues" (we call these "feminine issues") and men's traditional concerns such as foreign policy, crime, the economy, and national defense as "men's issues" (we call these "masculine issues").[3]

Research shows that gendered issues influence people's perceptions of men and women candidates (Lawless, 2004; Sapiro, 1981–1982). Men candidates, for example, are viewed as more capable with respect to foreign policy, crime, the economy, and national defense because they are believed to be more assertive, self-confident, and aggressive than women (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). In contrast, voters assume that women are better at dealing with "compassion" issues such as education, health care, child care, and family welfare because they are more considerate, caring, and kindhearted than men. These stereotypes are known to influence not just candidate evaluations (Herrnson et al., 2003; Kahn, 1993) but the campaign strategies and messages adopted by party leaders (Sanbonmatsu, 2006), members of the news media (Devitt, 1999; Heldman, Carroll, & Olson, 2005; Kahn, 1993), and voting behavior as well (Dolan, 2008; Koch, 2002; Lawless, 2004; Schaffner, 2005).

It makes sense, then, to suggest that the sex of the voice-over announcer would vary with the gender associations of the issue. As the marketing research discussed earlier suggests, women are generally seen as more credible spokespeople for products that are feminine, and men are generally seen as more credible spokespeople for products that are masculine (Bartsch et al., 2000; Dilevko & Harris, 1997; Kanungo & Pang, 1973; Misra & Beatty, 1990; Scharrer et al., 2006). Thus, gender continuity suggests that women should voice ads about feminine issues and men should voice ads about masculine issues in order to improve message credibility. This leads us to our first hypothesis:

> *H1:* Ads that address feminine issues will be more likely to use women's voices, while ads that address masculine issues will be more likely to use men's voices.

Party

The candidate's party may also influence the choice to have a man or woman voice an ad. There are many differences in the way the Democratic and Republican parties present themselves—and how they are perceived (King & Matland, 2003; Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009; Winter, 2010). Theories of partisan issue ownership hold that the Republican and Democratic parties are perceived by the public as more or less competent at handling certain issues (Damore, 2004; Petrocik, 1996). As Winter (2010) notes, the Democratic party is often seen as the feminine party because it "owns" and is advantaged on feminine issues (e.g., education, health care, and child care), while the Republican party is seen as the masculine party because it "owns" and is advantaged on masculine issues (e.g., national defense and foreign policy). These differences are reflected in political advertising. For example, Democrats running for Congress mentioned women's health frequently in their advertising in 2012 while Republicans almost ignored the issue (Fowler & Ridout, 2012).

Gendered partisan images may also be reinforced by the sex composition of the parties' elected officials: More high-ranking women politicians are Democrats than Republicans (Elder, 2008; Winter, 2010). Likewise, Hayes (2005) finds that Democratic candidates are perceived as more compassionate and empathetic ("feminine" traits) than Republicans, while Republicans are perceived as stronger leaders (a "masculine" trait). Given people's

gender stereotypes about the parties, the sex of the voice-over announcer may interact with the party of the candidate to influence perceptions of message credibility. The logic of continuity suggests that Democrats would benefit more from using women to voice their ads, while Republicans would benefit more from using men to voice their ads. Women may be seen as more credible voices of the feminine party (the Democratic Party) than men. Consistent with this logic, Iyengar and Valentino (2000) report increased credibility ratings for campaign advertisements that feature issues "owned" by the candidate's party. Thus, our second hypothesis is the following:

> *H2:* Democratic-sponsored ads will be more likely to use women's voices than Republican-sponsored ads, and Republican-sponsored ads will be more likely to use men's voices than Democratic-sponsored ads.

Candidate's Sex

The sex of the candidate could also affect the decision to use a man or woman to voice an advertisement for that candidate. Although no existing studies speak to how voice interacts with the sex of the candidate, we can again apply the logic of continuity to generate some expectations. If we think of the "product" in this case to be the candidate and the voice-over announcer to be the spokesperson, then women should be perceived as more credible endorsers of women candidates, and men should be perceived as more credible endorsers of men candidates. Our third hypothesis, then, is this:

> *H3:* Ads on behalf of women candidates will be more likely to use women's voices, while ads on behalf of men candidates will be more likely to use men's voices.

Audience

For decades, campaigns have targeted specific audiences in the pursuit of votes. In recent years, the targeting of advertising has become even more specific. Some of that effort has been aimed at "microtargeting," or isolating specific individuals through data mining—based on their demographic profile, consumer habits, or political history—to receive a mobilization or persuasion message through mail, e-mail, social media, telephone, or door-to-door canvassing. At the same time, campaigns have engaged in "macrotargeting," or placing ads during certain television programs whose audiences are open to persuasion or likely supporters. In short, candidates "can more easily reach desired audiences and send more precise appeals" when they know information about "the demographic profile of a show's audience" (Ridout, Franz, Goldstein, & Feltus, 2012, p. 3). Not surprisingly, gender is one of the key characteristics campaigns use to target voters (Herrnson et al., 2003). Indeed, as far back as 1964, the Johnson campaign bought daytime television ads in an effort to speak to women (Mann, 2011).

The logic of homophily mentioned earlier suggests the benefits of matching the sex of the messenger and the sex of the receiver. For one, the more similar a receiver perceives himself or herself to the source (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003; O'Keefe, 1990), the more credible the ad messenger may be. For example, readers evaluate authors of the same sex as more interesting (White & Andsager, 1991). Research in this area also shows that receivers are more likely to be persuaded by a message if it is delivered by a source of the

same sex (Bochner,1994; Brock, 1965), while attitude change is more likely to result when source and receiver share the same sex (Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2003). In fact, receivers assign more weight to indicators of similarity, such as sex of the voice-over, in situations where there are fewer cues (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998), such as a political ad without a pictured speaker. Stated differently, matching the sex of the voice-over announcer and sex of the receiver may be even more important for political advertisements. Thus, our fourth hypothesis is this:

> *H4:* As the percentage of women in a program's audience increases, a woman's voice is more likely to be used to voice the ad.

Data and Methods

We use several sources of data in our investigation. The first is a database from the Wesleyan Media Project that contains coding of 7,114 unique ads aired in U.S. House and U.S. Senate elections in 2010 and 2012.[4] The unique ad is the unit of analysis. These data were originally collected by the Campaign Media Analysis Group (a division of Kantar Media) and represent almost the entire universe of electioneering ads aired between January 1 and Election Day in 2010 and 2012—both general election and primary. The data include ads sponsored by candidates and political parties, and ads paid for in coordinated fashion by candidates and parties. We excluded ads sponsored by independent groups from our analyses because it was often difficult to determine which candidates these ads—almost always attack ads—were designed to benefit. In addition, interest groups frequently reuse ads, airing the same basic ad in multiple races and doing little more than changing the name of the attacked candidate.

Coders characterized the ads on a variety of factors, including their tone (whether positive, contrast, or negative) and the presence of a voice-over. Specifically, coders were asked, "Is there someone doing a voice-over (narrating the ad) separate from a candidate?" There were four possible responses: "no," "yes, a female," "yes, a male," or "yes, both female and male voice-overs."[5] For our analyses, we turned this variable into a dichotomous one that indicated, given a voice-over, the presence of a woman's voice (even if there was also a man's voice) or its absence. The coding of the ads is matched with data on the characteristics of the sponsoring candidates, including their party affiliation (Republican, Democrat, or other).

Our next source of data is at the level of the ad airing, which allows us to speak to the targeting of ads on television. Here we employ data only from 2010. The data come from the Wesleyan Media Project, but we supplemented them with data from the Simmons Choices database, which allows one to search market research survey data. The Simmons data cover November 2008 to December 2009. This database allowed us to collect information on the sex distribution of the viewing audiences of hundreds of different television programs.

All told, we were able to match advertising data to audience information for 296 television programs, representing a range of genres, from situation comedies to news and talk programs. We found variation in the percentage of the audience that was made up of women, with an average of 50.7%, a standard deviation of 13.3%, and a range from 15.2% (*Mike and Mike*, a sports program on ESPN) to 86.7% (*Tori and Dean: Home Sweet Home*, a reality television show).[6]

One of the largest obstacles we faced was conceptualizing and operationalizing feminine and masculine, "women's issues" and "men's issues" (Reingold & Swers, 2011).

In much of the literature, the distinction between "women's issues" and "men's issues" is blurry and can vary from one study to the next. We therefore did not feel comfortable assigning issues as masculine or feminine by fiat, as some studies do. Thus, we operationalized masculine and feminine issues by seeing which issues men and women rank differently in importance. We collected polling data from four different surveys conducted by the Pew Center in February 2010, January 2011, December 2011, and March 2012.[7] We then calculated the distribution of response by sex to the following open-ended question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?" Pew researchers collapsed these open-ended responses into about 50 different categories. We ignored all of those issues mentioned by fewer than 10 individuals given the large confidence intervals around point estimates calculated on so few observations. Table 1 lists the issues by the proportion of women among those individuals mentioning each.

There were several issues for which the ratio of women to men citing an issue as an important problem was more than two to one. Many are social welfare issues traditionally labeled as women's issues such as education, health care, Social Security, and housing. Most of the other issues that women mentioned more frequently than men were "security issues," such as terrorism, the economic recession, and housing market foreclosures. Men were more likely to mention macroeconomic issues, such as the national debt, budget deficits, Wall Street, corporate America, and energy dependence. The only surprise was that men more frequently mentioned racism than women. By and large, these findings have high face validity. We then used these findings to code each issue in the ad database as masculine (at least 60% of respondents mentioning the issue were men), feminine (at least 60% of respondents mentioning the issue were women) or non-gendered (the remaining issues).[8] See the Appendix for full coding.

Our final set of data, used to examine the impact of the choice to use a man or woman as voice-over announcer, was survey data from Ace Metrix, a commercial firm that in 2012 tested nearly every ad aired in the year's presidential campaign, including those sponsored by candidates, parties, and groups.[9] For each of more than 300 unique ads aired in 2012, Ace Metrix asked a nationally representative Internet sample of 500 respondents for assessments of the ad's credibility, giving us a total of 81,720 respondents who answered questions about anywhere from one to five political ads.[10] Respondents were then asked to evaluate how credible they found the ad. Specifically, by accessing a survey URL provided by Ace Metrix to Survey Sampling International, survey respondents first viewed each ad online, and then used a slider to calibrate their response to nine questions, including the ad's credibility, on a 950-point scale.[11] These data also give us information on respondent-level characteristics, including age, education, gender, income, and past voting behavior, though we had to use a proxy measure of partisanship.[12]

Finally, we gathered data on the 2008 and 2012 presidential vote in each state and congressional district, which allows us to control for the partisanship of the voters at which ads were aimed.

Findings

One of our most important findings is also the most basic. As in the case of product advertising (Bartsch et al., 2000; Bretl & Cantor, 1988), our data show that male voice-overs dominated political advertising in 2010 and 2012 (Table 2). While 45.6% of ads in our sample used solely a male voice-over, only 20.1% of ads used solely a female voice-over. Another 7.0% used both, while 27.3% of ads employed no voice-over. If we limit the analysis solely to those ads containing a voice-over, 62.7% contained a male voice-over

Table 1
Differences in most important problem top issue concerns by sex of respondent

Issue	Women	Men	Diff.	N
Issues relating to the elderly	0.83	0.17	0.67*	18
Education/schools/affording education	0.80	0.20	0.60*	90
Health care (costs/accessibility)	0.73	0.27	0.46*	350
Social Security	0.72	0.28	0.44*	25
Morality/religion/family values	0.69	0.31	0.38*	100
Terrorism	0.68	0.32	0.36*	44
Recession/depression/slowing of the economy	0.66	0.34	0.31*	29
Housing market/foreclosures	0.65	0.35	0.30*	43
Greed	0.64	0.36	0.28*	36
Uneven distribution of wealth/inequality	0.63	0.37	0.27*	41
Environment/pollution	0.62	0.38	0.23	26
Inflation/difference between wages/costs	0.61	0.39	0.22	46
Financial crisis/credit crunch/banking	0.60	0.40	0.21	48
War/war in Iraq/war in Afghanistan	0.60	0.40	0.20*	150
Too much foreign aid/spend money at home	0.58	0.42	0.17	24
Poverty/hunger/starvation	0.57	0.43	0.13	60
All other social/domestic issues	0.56	0.44	0.12	25
Crime/violence/gangs/justice system	0.56	0.44	0.12	34
Unemployment/lack of jobs/job cuts	0.56	0.44	0.12*	1285
Finances/money	0.54	0.46	0.09	70
Immigration/illegal immigration	0.54	0.46	0.07	67
Obama	0.53	0.47	0.05	74
Drugs/alcohol	0.53	0.47	0.05	19
Economy (unspecific)	0.51	0.49	0.02	1055
Leadership/lack of political leadership	0.50	0.50	0.00	42
Homelessness	0.50	0.50	0.00	24
Other	0.49	0.51	−0.03	240
Government	0.48	0.52	−0.04	27
Taxes (unspecific)	0.47	0.53	−0.05	57
Defense issues/national and homeland security	0.47	0.53	−0.07	58
All other economic issues mentions	0.46	0.54	−0.09	94
Partisanship/the parties/gridlock	0.45	0.55	−0.10	167
Energy costs/rising gas/heating prices	0.45	0.55	−0.10	87
Trade/jobs moving overseas	0.45	0.55	−0.10	58
All other international/foreign issues mentions	0.44	0.56	−0.11	18
Dissatisfaction with government/politics/Obama	0.38	0.62	−0.24*	229
National debt/budget/deficit/balanced budget	0.36	0.64	−0.28*	483
Wall Street/corporate America/banks	0.33	0.67	−0.33*	30
Race relations/racism	0.30	0.70	−0.40*	20
Oil dependence/energy	0.17	0.83	−0.67*	24

Note. Data come from four telephone surveys sponsored by the Pew Research Center in September 2010, January 2011, December 2011, and March 2012. Entries are the proportion of men or women (out of all respondents) who cite the particular issue as important in response to the open-ended question, "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?" We also report the difference in those two proportions by respondent sex and number of people in the sample who cited the issue.

*Proportion of women is significantly different from .50.

Table 2

Distribution of sex of voice-overs (2010 and 2012 U.S. House and Senate ads by candidate, party, and coordinated sponsors)

Voice-over type	All ads ($N = 7,376$)	Ads with voice-overs
No voice-over	27.3	
Woman voice-over	20.1	27.7
Man voice-over	45.6	62.7
Woman and man voice-over	7.0	9.7

Source. Wesleyan Media Project coding of Kantar Media/CMAG data.

only and 27.7% contained a female voice-over only. Male voice-overs outnumbered female voice-overs, then, by more than a 2:1 ratio.

In order to test our hypotheses about when women's voices are used, we estimated a logit model predicting the use of a woman's voice (occasionally in addition to a man's voice) as opposed to solely a man's voice. The unique ad was the unit of analysis. Our model included indicators of the party of the benefiting candidate (with Republicans as the omitted category), sex of the candidate, sponsor of the ad (with candidate ads omitted), tone of the ad (with positive ads omitted), whether the ad concerns the personal characteristics of the candidates (versus policy), a 2010 indicator variable, and a measure of partisanship (Obama's percentage of the two-party vote in 2008 for ads aired in 2010, and his percentage of the two-party vote in 2012 for ads aired in 2012). We included an indicator of whether the issue is a masculine one or a feminine one, with neutral issues serving as the omitted category. Importantly, we examined only those ads that use a voice-over, thus reducing the size of our sample to 4,348. Moreover, we clustered standard errors on the candidate to take account of the non-independence of ads aired on behalf of the same candidate.[13]

In short, estimates reported in Table 3 reveal several factors that help to predict the sex of the voice-over announcer. Our first hypothesis suggested that women would serve as voice-over announcers when the ad concerned feminine issues and men would serve as voice-over announcers when the ad concerned masculine issues. This idea was supported, as ads discussing feminine issues were significantly more likely than ads discussing non-gendered issues to be voiced by women. Likewise, ads discussing masculine issues were significantly less likely than ads discussing non-gendered issues to be voiced by women. When the issue in the ad was feminine, the predicted probability of the ad being voiced by a woman was .419 compared to .293 when the issue was masculine.[14]

We also found some party differences, but they were not in the direction expected. Republicans were more likely to use a woman's voice than were Democrats. This finding does not support H2 and thus speaks against theories that emphasize gender continuity between various elements of the advertising. The substantive impact of party was considerable. The predicted probability of using a woman to voice the ad rises from .283 when the candidate is a Democrat to .420 when the candidate is a Republican. One plausible explanation for this unexpected finding is that Republicans use women as voice-over announcers more often because Republicans are more likely to face women as opponents. To test this idea, we re-estimated the earlier model, controlling for the sex of the opposition candidate, and we found that the coefficient on the woman opponent variable is positive and significant, suggesting the sex of the opponent does matter. Still, the coefficient on the Democratic Party indicator variable barely changed (moving from –.607 to –.612).[15] Thus, there must

Table 3
Predictors of use of women's voice in 2010 and 2012 candidate, party, and
coordinated ads for U.S. House and U.S. Senate ($N = 4,348$)

	Coef.	s.e.	z	p
Democrat	−0.613	0.109	−5.620	0.000
Independent	−0.031	0.343	−0.090	0.928
Man candidate	0.404	0.123	3.280	0.001
Party ad	−0.726	0.173	−4.210	0.000
Coordinate ad	−0.112	0.148	−0.760	0.450
Contrast ad	0.172	0.099	1.740	0.081
Negative ad	0.233	0.096	2.430	0.015
Personal ad	0.280	0.102	2.740	0.006
Year 2010	−0.333	0.071	−4.660	0.000
Masc. issue	0.220	0.076	2.890	0.004
Fem. issue	2.635	0.523	5.040	0.000
Democratic vote	−2.024	0.296	−6.840	0.000
Constant	−0.613	0.109	−5.620	0.000

Note. Logit model estimated clustering on candidate where the unique ad (not number of airings) was the unit of analysis. (*Source:* Wesleyan Media Project coding and analysis of Kantar Media/CMAG data.)

be some other explanation as well. One possibility is that Democrats are attempting to tone down their party's feminine image, and Republicans are attempting to tone down their party's masculine image, so as to appeal to a wider number of voters.

Third, we found that men candidates are more likely than women candidates to use a woman to do the voice-over, which contradicts H3. Indeed, the predicted probability of using a woman's voice increases from .289 to .383 when the candidate is a man as opposed to a woman. One possible explanation for our finding of sex discontinuity between the candidate and the voice-over announcer is the desire of ad makers to avoid audience confusion about who was speaking (Stone, 2008). Descriptive statistics support this interpretation. When a man candidate narrates his ad, women voice-overs are more common (34%) than when he does not narrate the ad (27%). The reverse pattern holds for women candidates. When a woman candidate narrates her ad, a woman voice-over is used less often (15%) than when she does not (19%). Although this confusion argument makes sense, it is also possible that campaigns want to reach out broadly to both men and women voters.

Several other findings are worth noting. First, women were more likely to be used as voice-over announcers for negative and contrast ads than for positive ads, which supports the conventional wisdom that women's voices should be used in attacks to minimize the likelihood of a backlash (Feiler, 2010; Stone, 2008). Second, women's voices were more common when the ad was about a candidate's characteristics as opposed to policy issues. This finding is consistent with recent research showing that women are frequently recognized for their personal characteristics rather than their substantive policy goals; for example, women candidates receive more trait coverage and less issue coverage than men (Bystrom, 2010; Dunaway, Lawrence, Rose, & Weber, 2013; Heldman et al., 2005). Third, the more Democratic the district or state, the more likely the ad featured a

Table 4
Predictors of use of women's voice in 2010 candidate, party, and coordinated ads
for U.S. House and U.S. Senate ($N = 86{,}627$)

	Coef.	s.e.	z	p
Female % audience	0.443	0.191	2.320	0.020
Democrat	−0.775	0.171	−4.540	0.000
Independent	−0.754	0.575	−1.310	0.190
Man candidate	0.341	0.256	1.330	0.182
Party ad	−0.568	0.214	−2.650	0.008
Coordinated ad	0.486	0.366	1.330	0.184
Contrast ad	−0.182	0.234	−0.780	0.438
Negative ad	−0.103	0.230	−0.450	0.655
Personal ad	0.172	0.252	0.680	0.496
Masc. issue	−0.351	0.170	−2.060	0.039
Fem. issue	0.206	0.166	1.240	0.215
Democratic vote	0.605	0.947	0.640	0.523
Constant	−0.987	0.555	−1.780	0.075

Note. Logit model predicting use of women's voice, clustering on unique ad. Data on female audience percentage come from the Simmons Choices database while ad data come from Wesleyan Media Project coding and analysis of Kantar Media/CMAG data.

woman as voice-over announcer. This suggests that audience characteristics may enter into campaigns' choices about the content of ads—something we consider more fully in the next section.

Targeting

With respect to targeting, we asked whether ads aired during programs with a disproportionately female audience are more likely to feature women's voices. We estimated a model using data at the level of the ad airing rather than the unique ad, predicting whether a woman's voice (as opposed to a man's voice only) is used. We only analyze data from 2010 because we were unable to acquire audience data for 2012. We include the same covariates used in our earlier multivariate model, with one addition: the proportion of the audience that is women. Our model estimates in Table 4 lend support to the idea that campaigns target ads to appeal to particular audiences. The proportion of women in the audience is significantly related to the sex of the voice-over, with women's voices more common as the proportion of women in the audience increases. These results support the sex continuity expectations derived from marketing theory, which suggest that retail messages resonate when the gendered characteristics of an ad, product, and target match.

The size of the effect is moderate. Moving from a program with an audience that is 15% women—the program during which an ad aired with the lowest female percentage in our database—to a program with an audience that is 87% women—the highest in our database—increases the predicted probability of having a woman's voice from .270 to .337, an increase of .07. While not a large change, it nevertheless is substantively important given the small number of spots that employ women's voices in the first place.

The coefficients in the model are largely consistent with findings of our earlier model. For instance, Democratic-sponsored ads, party-sponsored ads, and ads that discuss masculine issues remain less likely to feature a woman voice-over announcer than Republican ads. However, the effects of having a man candidate and discussing feminine issues disappear in the present model.

In sum, there are differences in the use of women's voices depending upon the target audience, with women's voices more common during programs with larger audiences of women and men's voices more common during programs with larger audiences of men.

Effects of Voice-Over Choice

We have demonstrated that campaigns are strategic in their choice to use a man or woman to voice an ad, but do these choices matter for the success of the ad? And if so, are campaigns making smart choices, deploying men's voices and women's voices so as to maximize the ad's influence?

To answer these questions, we used the Ace Metrix data to estimate two ordinary least squares regression models predicting the perceived credibility of the advertisement.[16] The first model includes several key predictors, including the sex of the voice-over announcer, indicators of whether the issue or issues mentioned in the ad were masculine, feminine, or neither, and the sex of the respondent.[17] Because we found differences in the use of men and women as voice-over announcers depending on the gender associations of the issue, the gender composition of the audience, and the tone of the advertisement, our second model also included interactions between the sex of the voice-over announcer and three other variables: whether the issue was masculine or feminine, the sex of the respondent, and the party of the sponsoring candidate. This allows us to test for whether men's or women's voices were better in certain kinds of ads or with certain types of audiences.[18]

The estimates in the first model in Table 5 reveal no association between the sex of the voice-over announcer and perceived credibility, but ads about feminine issues and neutral issues were also seen as less credible than ads about masculine issues, and women, in general, perceived the ads as less credible than did men, consistent with Flanagin and Metzger (2003). Positive ads, unsurprisingly, were also viewed as more credible.

When we turn to the second model in Table 5, which includes interaction terms, we now find that the sex of the voice-over announcer matters, with women's voices perceived as less credible than men's voices. When the issue was feminine, ads using women's voices were rated as more credible than ads using men's voices, and the same was true for ads featuring non-gendered issues. The tendency of campaigns to use women's voices for ads featuring feminine issues—and to use men's voices for ads featuring masculine issues—is a wise one, according to these findings.

Women respondents viewed women's voices as more credible than did men, suggesting that campaigns' using women's voices when the audience is largely made up of women is smart strategy. Our expectation that women's voices might be seen as more credible by Democrats, however, was not supported. The interaction between sex of the voice-over announcer and the party of the ad sponsor was an insignificant predictor.

To provide a better sense of when men's and women's voices might be more effective in an advertisement, we estimated some predicted levels of credibility, altering the sex of the voice-over announcer and the gender associations of the issues, the sex of the respondent, and the party of the sponsor. Figure 1 shows that while men's voices lend more credibility for masculine issues, when the issue is feminine or non-gendered, women's voices are more effective. Figure 2 shows that men find men's voices more credible, on average, but

Table 5

Predictors of ad credibility in 2012 presidential ads ($N = 110{,}795$)

	Model 1				Model 2			
	Coef.	s.e.	t	p	Coef.	s.e.	t	p
Woman (or both) voice-over	2.32	2.02	1.14	0.25	−12.70	4.26	−2.98	0.00
Feminine issue	−9.03	2.44	−3.70	0.00	−15.21	3.18	−4.79	0.00
Non-gendered issue	−10.06	2.45	−4.10	0.00	−13.48	2.90	−4.65	0.00
Woman (or both) voice-over × feminine issue					15.91	5.08	3.13	0.00
Woman (or both) voice-over × neutral issue					10.77	5.05	2.14	0.03
Woman (or both) voice-over × female respondent					11.70	3.70	3.16	0.00
Democratic ad	9.28	2.43	3.82	0.00	9.43	2.87	3.29	0.00
Woman (or both) voice-over × Democratic ad					−2.87	4.19	−0.69	0.49
Positive ad	21.44	3.09	6.93	0.00	20.92	3.16	6.62	0.00
Negative ad	4.02	2.38	1.69	0.09	3.49	2.40	1.45	0.15
Party (or coordinated) ad	12.18	5.65	2.16	0.03	11.30	5.68	1.99	0.05
Interest group ad	22.97	2.33	9.88	0.00	22.89	2.33	9.82	0.00
Policy matters	20.77	3.56	5.84	0.00	20.54	3.59	5.73	0.00
Personal and policy matters	18.82	4.04	4.65	0.00	18.88	4.06	4.65	0.00
Economic ad	−6.22	2.02	−3.08	0.00	−6.12	2.04	−2.99	0.00
Partisanship	82.18	0.58	141.01	0.00	82.20	0.58	141.08	0.00
Strength of partisanship	2.63	0.98	2.68	0.01	2.62	0.98	2.67	0.01
Education	−3.33	0.36	−9.25	0.00	−3.37	0.36	−9.36	0.00
Female respondent	−6.79	2.10	−3.24	0.00	−11.90	2.55	−4.66	0.00
Age 30–49	−16.29	2.63	−6.20	0.00	−16.30	2.63	−6.21	0.00
Age 50 plus	−26.20	2.52	−10.40	0.00	−26.16	2.52	−10.38	0.00
Income under $40K	2.81	2.74	1.03	0.30	2.72	2.74	0.99	0.32
Income $40–$70K	11.76	2.59	4.55	0.00	11.75	2.59	4.54	0.00
Days to election	0.35	0.04	8.18	0.00	0.35	0.04	8.01	0.00
Days to election (squared)	0.00	0.00	−7.68	0.00	0.00	0.00	−7.48	0.00
Constant	513.19	7.86	65.27	0.00	520.27	8.03	64.77	0.00

Note. OLS models estimated clustering on respondent. Respondent data on perceived credibility of ads come from Ace Metrix; information on ad content comes from Wesleyan Media Project coding of Kantar Media/CMAG data.

13
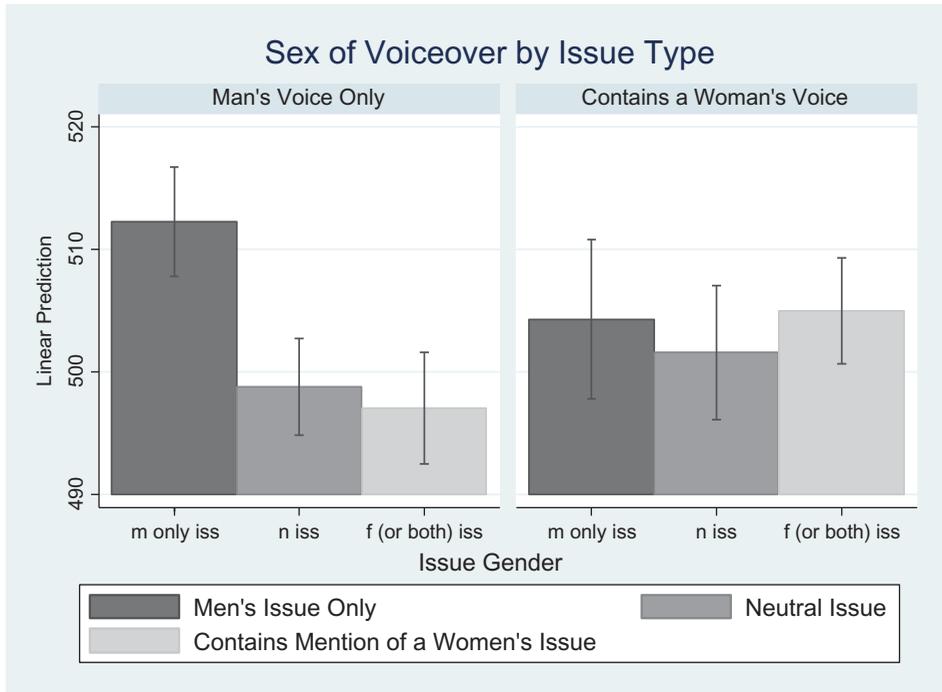
Figure 1. Predicted credibility scores by sex of voice-over and gender associations of issue. *Note:* 95% confidence intervals are displayed.

women perceive no difference in the credibility of men and women as announcers. Finally, Figure 3 shows that men's and women's voices are equally effective regardless of the party sponsoring the ad.

Discussion and Conclusion

We draw on several data sources to show patterns in campaigns' use of men's and women's voices in advertising. Campaigns are more likely to use women's voices for issues perceived as feminine, a wise strategy given our finding that a woman voice-over announcer is rated more credible than a man when the issue is feminine. Campaigns also are more likely to use a woman as a voice-over announcer when the audience contains a larger percentage of women. Again, our survey results support this strategy, as women rate ads voiced by women as more credible than men do.

Given theories of gender continuity, we had predicted that Democratic campaigns would be more likely to use women's voices than Republican campaigns as a way to emphasize the party's association as the feminine party. But we found that it was Republicans who were more likely to use women to voice ads—and not just because they were more likely to face a woman as an opponent. Why this strategy? Our suspicion is that it may be to "tone down" the party's masculine image so as to appeal to a wider number of voters. Indeed, Hayes (2005) finds that Democrats do better at the polls when they emphasize "masculine" Republican traits such as leadership, and Republicans do better when they emphasize "feminine" traits associated with the Democratic Party, such as compassion and empathy. Our survey findings, however, suggest that it hardly matters, as Democrats have
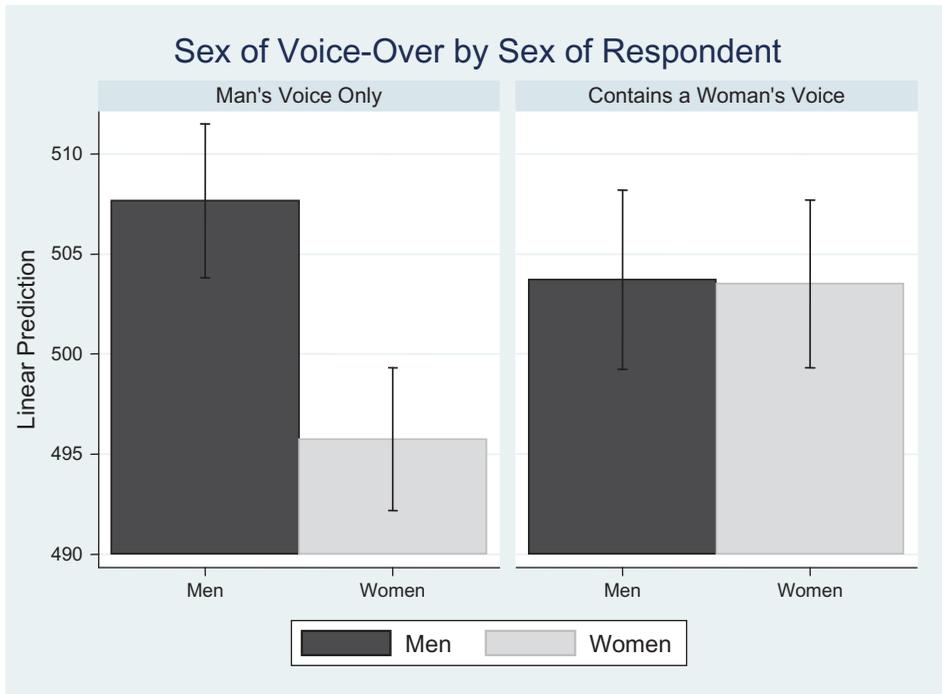
Figure 2. Predicted credibility scores by sex of voice-over and sex of respondent. *Note:* 95% confidence intervals are displayed.
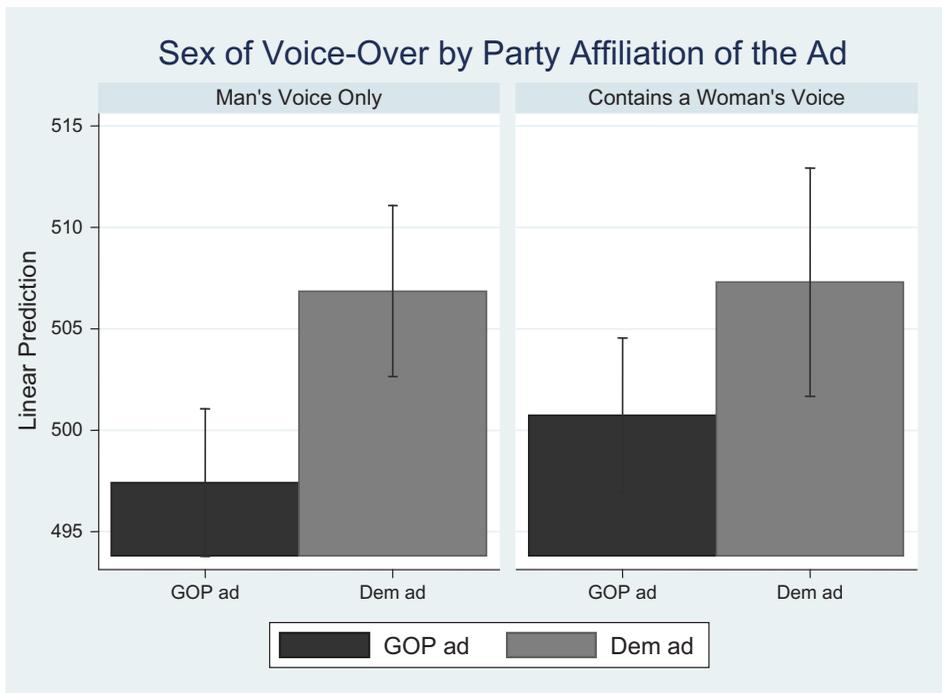
Figure 3. Predicted credibility scores by sex of voice-over and party of sponsor. *Note:* 95% confidence intervals are displayed.

no credibility advantage over Republicans whether they employ women or men to voice their ads. We should be careful, however, in our interpretations, as all of the Democratic ads that we examined supported Barack Obama and most of the Republican ads supported Mitt Romney (a few backed Rick Santorum and Ron Paul). Thus, we cannot say for certain whether this finding generalizes to a larger group of Republican and Democratic candidates.

We also found that men candidates were more likely to use women to voice their ads, a result that runs counter to our expectations generated from the literature on gender continuity. This strategy may be employed by men candidates to reach out to women voters—and by women candidates to reach out to men. As we showed earlier, this strategy may also be used to avoid confusion about who is speaking. But we are unable to speak to its effectiveness given that all of the presidential ads in our survey database from 2012 supported men candidates.

Scholars who have studied "videostyle" have documented differences in how candidates present themselves along many dimensions such as image, tone, setting, actors, and emotional appeals, but our analysis of nonverbal messages seeks to do something different. By examining voice, we are able to evaluate *along which dimensions* campaigns act strategically. Unlike commercial advertising, political advertisers may wish not only to reinforce a message, such as having women voice an ad about abortion, but also to moderate one by having women voice negative ads. Looking at when campaigns employ men or women to voice ads allows us to analyze the extent to which ad messages are a reflection of candidate characteristics, the messages they wish to promote, or the targeted audience. We find continuity between voice and message (issue and audience) but discontinuity often between voice and candidate characteristics (candidate sex, party). More broadly, our results suggest that understanding the messages that campaigns convey requires thinking about the multiple ways (message, setting, voice, audience) by which they—and indeed all of us—communicate.

While research on gender and elite behavior reaches mixed conclusions about the extent to which there are differences in how men and women campaign (Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, & Robertson, 2004; Herrnson & Lucas, 2006; Kahn, 1993; Larson, 2001), many argue that differences have diminished considerably over time (Dolan, 2005; Herrnson, 1995; Panagopoulos, 2004; Sapiro, 2002; Strach & Sapiro, 2011). Dabelko and Herrnson (1997, p. 133) describe women's and men's campaigns that "closely resembled one another" while Sapiro, Walsh, Strach, and Hennings (2011, p. 116) conclude that "gender plays little generalizable role in shaping basic campaign presentation." Our research has shown that in this one area, at least, sizable gender differences remain. Campaigns—like product advertising—overwhelmingly choose men to voice their ads.

However, given our empirical results, it is not entirely clear why that is so. Campaign consultants suggest there is a small pool of individuals who do political voice-overs (Stone, 2008) and often a compressed time frame with which to put ads together (Johnson, 2001). But the overreliance on men's voices is also found in product advertising, suggesting that it is more than the availability of voice talent or the time needed to create an ad that explains this pattern. In part, the dominance of men's voices may be habit: ad makers are doing things the way they always have been done, and the lack of comprehensive data (on political advertising at least) has not challenged them to change. Although it may *sometimes* be advantageous to employ men's voices, namely, when the issue is a masculine one and one's audience is largely men, at other times it may be more advantageous to employ's women's voices, such as when the ad mentions a feminine or neutral issue. And in many circumstances, men and women as voice-over announcers are equally effective. The lesson, then, is that smart campaigns should not default to using a man's voice for their advertising;

careful consideration of the circumstances under which to use men's and women's voices may lend the ad more credibility—and thus more potential for persuasion.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Alternatively, they may pursue a *mismatch* strategy wherein the sex of the voice-over conflicts with other attributes of the ad's message, such as having a man voice an ad that mentions a feminine issue or having a woman voice an ad for Republicans (the "masculine" party). See Debevec and Iyer (1986) and Bellizzi and Milner (1991).

2. An alternative explanation for the effectiveness of gender product-spokesperson congruence points to the ease of encoding information in memory. The "filtering model" of Misra and Beatty (1990) suggests that when the characteristics of the spokesperson are inconsistent with the characteristics of the product they will be "filtered out" and not encoded into memory. By contrast, when there is congruence (e.g., a woman announces an ad about the laundry detergent), encoding in memory requires less effort.

3. These labels are typically substantiated on the basis of self-administered surveys, exit poll data, or public opinion polls indicating that women (1) care more than men about a certain issue or (2) are viewed as more capable with respect to handling such issues. See Huddy and Terkildsen (1993); Hutchings, Valentino, Philpot, and White (2004); Kaufmann and Petrocik (1999); and Lawless (2004).

4. We were unable to code 7.4% of total ads because we were unable to track down the videos. There appears to be nothing systematic about the characteristics of these ads that we were unable to code.

5. To test the reliability of coding, we had additional coders classify the voice-overs, resulting in 2 ratings for 500 ads. The reliability of this coding was quite high (kappa = .83).

6. We were able to match up audience information for about 130,000 ad airings in House, Senate, and gubernatorial races in 2010, admittedly a small fraction of the total ad airings in these races (1,899,266), because (1) Simmons did not ask about all programs that viewers might have watched and (2) Simmons data cover only national programs (40% of political ads air during local news).

7. All surveys were sponsored by the Pew Research Center, and all consisted of both landline and cell phone interviews with a nationally representative sample of respondents living in the United States or continental United States. The September 2010 survey had a sample of 3,509 adults, and interviewing took place from August 25 to September 6. The January 2011 survey had a sample of 1,503 adults, and interviewing took place between January 5 and January 9. The December 2011 survey had a sample of 1,523 adults, and interviewing took place December 7 to December 11. The March 2012 survey had a sample of 1,503 adults, and interviewing took place March 7 to March 11. Both surveys were conducted in both English and Spanish by Princeton Survey Research Associates.

8. We also tested an alternative definition of masculine and feminine as defined by the literature, and the substantive findings of our central model did not change.

9. Ace Metrix tested nearly every unique spot, but only in rare cases did they test different versions of "cookie cutter" ads (those ads that differ only slightly with variations in imagery or text depending upon the market of airing). Furthermore, if an ad were to air in some cases as a candidate-sponsored ad and then again as a coordinated spot, Ace Metrix typically tested only one version of that ad. Ace Metrix also tested some ads that, according to Kantar Media/CMAG, did not air on television. All of those are excluded from this analysis.

10. The Ace Metrix online experiments were conducted by Survey Sampling International. Each ad was evaluated by a nationally representative sample of U.S. residents age 18 and older. Minimum quotas were imposed on age, gender, and income. Each survey contained four or five ads (some of them nonpolitical) for evaluation, with the order of ad presentation randomized between respondents. The average number of political ads evaluated per respondent was 2.43; the minimum was 1 spot, and the maximum was 27 spots. Respondents were generally contacted within 24 to 48 hours of an ad's initial airing, which makes it more likely that respondents would not have viewed the ad prior to the survey.

11. Specific wording was "I find this commercial credible."

12. No traditional measure of partisanship is available in the data. Instead, we use a 7-point measure based upon frequency of reported voting for one party over another ranging from "I always vote Democrat" to "I always vote Republican" with "I vote for about the same" number of Republicans and Democrats in the middle. We exclude those who are not registered to vote.

13. If we re-estimate this model using a woman's voice only as the dependent variable (as opposed to including ads that feature both men's and women's voices), we find only one substantive change to the findings: the year 2010 indicator becomes a significant (negative) predictor of the use of a woman's voice.

14. Probabilities here and elsewhere were estimated holding all other variables at their existing values.

15. The number of cases in this model falls to 3,683 because some candidates did not face opponents.

16. To account for non-independence of observations, we clustered on the respondent.

17. In order to make presentation of our results easier, we collapse this measure into two categories: woman or woman and man announcer, on the one hand, and man announcer only, on the other hand.

18. We included a long list of other predictors in our model, both characteristics of the advertisements and characteristics of the survey respondent. These included the following: sponsor type (e.g., party, group, or candidate), the substantive (personal versus policy versus both) focus of the ad, whether the ad concerned the economy (a dominant issue in 2012), along with partisanship, education, age, and income of the respondent. We also controlled for days to the election and the square of days to the election. Full variable coding is found in the Appendix.

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Appendix: Question wording and variable coding

Sex of voice-over: Is there someone doing a voice-over (narrating the ad) separate from a candidate? 1 = woman or woman and man voice-over announcer, 0 = man voice-over announcer

Democrat: 1 = ad favors Democrat, 0 = ad favors Republican or Independent

Independent: 1 = Independent, 0 = not independent

Man candidate: 1 = man, 0 = woman

Party ad: 1 = party-sponsored ad, 0 = not party-sponsored ad

Coordinated ad: 1 = ad sponsored by party and candidate, 0 = non-coordinated ad

Ad tone: "In your judgment, is the primary purpose of the ad to promote a specific candidate, attack a candidate, or contrast the candidates?" Positive Ad: 1 = positive ad, 0 = not a positive ad; Contrast Ad: 1 = contrast ad, 0 = not a contrast ad; Negative Ad: 1 = negative ad, 0 = not negative ad

Substance: "In your judgment, is the primary focus of the ad personal characteristics of either candidate or policy matters?" Personal Ad: 1 = primarily about candidate's personal characteristics, 0 = not primarily about candidate's personal characteristics; Policy Ad: 1 = primarily about policy issues, 0 = not primarily about policy issues; Personal and Policy Ad: 1 = about both personal and policy issues, 0 = otherwise

Year 2010: 1 = 2010, 0 = 2012

Masculine issue: 1 = deficit/budget/debt, race relations/civil rights, energy policy, government ethics/scandal, government regulations, corporate fraud, and Wall Street, 0 = otherwise

Feminine issue: 1 = recession/economic stimulus, housing/subprime mortgages, economic disparity/income inequality, abortion, moral/family/religious values, child care, health care, Social Security, women's health and terrorism, 0 = otherwise

Democratic vote: percentage of Obama's two-party vote in 2008 or 2012

Economic ad: coded 1 if any of the following issues are mentioned, 0 otherwise: economy (generic reference), taxes, deficit/budget/debt, government spending, recession/economic stimulus, minimum wage, farming, business, union, employment/jobs, poverty, trade/globalization, housing/subprime mortgages, economic disparity/income inequality

Partisanship: 1–7 scale indicating frequency of reported voting for one party over another ranging from "I always vote Democrat" to "I always vote Republican" with "I vote for about the same" number of Republicans and Democrats at 4

Strength of partisanship: Folded partisanship scale

Education: 10 = GED or high school education, 14 = some college or two-year degree, 16 = four-year degree, 18 = master's, professional, or graduate degree

Female respondent: 1 = female, 0 = male

Age 30–49: 1 = age 30–49, 0 = otherwise

Age 50 plus: 1 = age 50 or older, 0 = otherwise

Income under $40K: 1 = income less than $40,000 per year, 0 = otherwise

Income $40–$70K: 1 = income between $40,000 and $70,000 per year, 0 = otherwise

Days to election: number of days between respondent's interview and Election Day

Days to election (squared): square of number of days between respondent's interview and Election Day