The gender gap has been an important feature of American elections since 1980. Yet, most explanations for the effects of gender on voting behavior focus on differences between men and women without taking account of how campaign strategies may serve to highlight or mask these differences. I examine how Senate candidates act strategically in deciding whether and how to target women voters. I find that candidates make these decisions based largely on two factors: (1) the importance of these issues to the state’s voters and (2) whether gender gaps had been decisive in previous statewide contests. Analysis of exit-poll data indicates that when campaigns focused more on women’s issues, women became more likely to vote Democratic while the vote choices of men were unaffected. Thus, campaign strategies do appear to influence the importance of gender differences in voting behavior.
whether and how to target women voters, but that these decisions also appear to work. Ultimately, the influence of gender on voting behavior results not only from the existence of policy differences between men and women, but also because of strategic decisions made by candidates determining whether to focus attention on such issues.

Women, the Gender Gap, and Campaign Strategies

Since the 1980 presidential election, women have voted more Democratic and are more likely to affiliate with the Democratic Party than men (Conover 1988; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Norrander 1997). Because the gender gap emerged in 1980, some asserted that it resulted from the Republican Party’s rejection of the Equal Rights Amendment and strong antiabortion platform, though others have rejected this explanation (Cook and Wilcox 1991). Differences in socioeconomic status may also have caused a growth in the gender gap since women tend to be less affluent than men and they are more likely to benefit from social welfare programs supported by the Democratic Party (Erie and Rein 1988; Piven 1985). Some research also shows that the gender gap has less to do with a change in the preferences of women than it does in the movement of males, particularly southern males, away from the Democratic Party (Kaufmann and Petrocik 1997; Kenski 1988; Norrander 1999; Wirls 1986). According to this explanation, conservative males have switched parties in recent years bringing their party affiliations into line with their conservative ideologies. Women are not as likely to share this conservative outlook, so they have stayed in the Democratic Party during this same period.

Regardless of its source, the gender gap has played an important role in national and subnational elections for a quarter century. Yet, the size and importance of the gender gap has varied considerably during this time. In presidential contests since 1980, the gender gap has been as small as 4% in 1992 and as large as 16% in 1996. The size of the gender gap varies not only over time, but also across elections held during the same year. According to the Voter News Service (VNS) exit poll, the gender gap in the 2000 Senate races ranged from a small negative gap in Mississippi (men were 4% more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate than women) to 19% in Nebraska. This suggests that rather than acting as a constant force

in American elections, the influence of gender on voting decisions may be significantly affected by campaigns.

If the importance of gender on vote decisions is affected by campaigns, candidates may act strategically to influence its role for their advantage. In formulating their strategies, candidates rationally consider how to use their limited resources efficiently by focusing on a winning message (Simon 2002). Two factors are of primary importance. First, candidates must identify segments of the electorate that are most susceptible to influence from the campaign. Second, once candidates have identified these voters, they must determine the message that will be successful in winning this group’s votes. I discuss these factors below.

Deciding to Target Women

In determining which groups to target during a campaign, candidates may consider women voters for two reasons. First, women typically comprise a larger portion of the electorate than men. In 2000, 56% of women reported voting while only 53% of men did so, which means that there were nearly eight million more women voters nationwide than men. Second, women are less likely than men to have settled on a candidate until just before the election, which makes them more susceptible to campaign influence. Thus, candidates may find women voters to be an important part of their campaign strategies since they are not only a larger share of the electorate, but also more likely to be persuaded by campaigns.

However, candidates are challenged by uncertainty—an inability to know how their strategies might affect the outcome. Indeed, if one assumes similar turnout among men and women, a gender gap of 10% may lead to very different results. In one scenario, such a gap would lead to a Republican victory if the gap was created by the Democrat winning 50% of the women’s vote and 40% among men. In this case, the Democrat will have only won 45% of the total vote. On the other hand, a 10% gap could mean a Democratic victory if it was created by winning 60% of women voters and 50% of men. In this situation, the Democrat will have won with 55% of the vote. Finally, a 10% gap could mean that the Democrat won 55% of women and only 45% of men. This situation would result

---

1The gender gap actually first emerged in 1972, but it vanished in 1976. Only since 1980 has the gender gap been a persistent factor in presidential elections.

2Based on information from the Center for American Women in Politics (http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/Facts/sexdiff.pdf).

3According to the Annenberg National Election Survey’s daily interviews, women were, on average, 5.7% less likely to state a preference in their Senate election during the period of August–November 2000. Only on the day before the election were men and women equally likely to be undecided.
Thus, a gender gap does not necessarily mean victory for a Democratic candidate or defeat for a Republican. Every appeal a Democratic candidate makes to women comes with the opportunity cost of not spending those resources appealing to men. If a Democrat chooses to target women voters, but drives men away at the same time, this may mean that any gains he or she makes with women will be mirrored by similar losses among men. On the other hand, if a Democrat is able to target the votes of women without losing men (or while losing fewer votes from men than he or she gains from women), the Democrat will pursue this strategy and the resulting gender gap should benefit his or her campaign.

Because targeting women voters could result in very different outcomes, candidates will look for information to help reduce the uncertainty about whether this strategy will work. One way to reduce uncertainty is to learn from previous campaigns (Fenno 1996; Hershey 1984). When a campaign strategy has been effective in the past, it suggests a higher likelihood that it will succeed in the future. Thus, candidates may alter their strategies depending on the influence that gender gaps have had in previous statewide elections. In 19 of the 34 states with Senate campaigns in 2000, a gender gap proved decisive in a gubernatorial or senatorial campaign held in the previous six years. In each of these cases, a Democratic candidate won statewide office but would not have done so without the benefit of a gender gap. In other words, the gender gap provided the winning margin of victory for the Democratic candidate and a smaller or nonexistent gap would have meant a Republican victory (no Republican won because he or she did better among women than men). Depending on their perspective, candidates looking at such recent campaign history will act very differently. In an attempt to reproduce a successful formula, Democratic candidates may work to generate a similar gender gap by making appeals to women voters. Republicans, on the other hand, will have learned that gender gaps hurt their chances of winning and they will try to minimize the size of this gap.

The candidate’s own gender may also affect the uncertainty involved in making appeals to women. Indeed, women candidates can be more confident that appeals to women will be successful compared to men (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Dabelko and Herrnson 1997; Kahn 1993). On the other hand, this effect may depend on the candidate’s party affiliation. Republican women may be less likely than Democratic women to campaign on women’s issues since doing so reinforces the mixed signals sent to voters by their gender (liberal cue) and party affiliation (conservative cue). Thus, Republican women may avoid women’s issues to avoid sending conflicting cues to voters (Koch 2002b).

Primed Women’s Issues

Once a candidate has decided to target women voters, the second step is determining an effective strategy for winning their votes. Though there is some debate about whether appeals made during campaigns influence election outcomes (Bartels 1992), other evidence indicates that campaigns serve to activate predispositions and affect how citizens judge candidates (Finkel 1993; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Through the agenda-setting effect, campaigns lead citizens to consider some issues as more important than others by focusing more on those issues in news coverage and campaign ads (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Weaver 1981; West 2001). As they are set on the agenda, particular issues become primed in the minds of voters, meaning that voters give those issues more weight when making their vote decisions (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). For example, Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign successfully emphasized the issue of the economy as the standard by which citizens should evaluate the candidates because the weak economy was a problematic issue for the incumbent president (West 2001). Clinton benefited by having economic issues primed in the minds of voters.

Candidates often use campaign messages to focus voters’ attention toward some issues and away from others. But how do candidates decide which issues to focus attention on and which to ignore? Campaign messages often focus on issues where the candidate has an advantage, whether because of their party or background, while concentrating less on other topics (Franklin 1991; Petrocik 1996; Sellers 1998). Candidates may also use their campaigns to draw support from particular demographic groups or to avoid losing support from such groups. Thus, if targeting women has been a successful strategy for Democrats in past elections, Democratic candidates may use their campaigns to promote issue agendas that will attract more support from women and create large gender gaps in their favor. On the other hand, Republicans may try to minimize this effect by drawing attention away from such issues and priming issues on which there are smaller gender differences.

But which issues are most likely to attract women to the Democratic candidate and avoid the Republican?
Most scholars agree that the gender gap is largely caused by differences in the attitudes of men and women on a subset of issues, especially those dealing with social welfare policy (Conway, Steurnagel, and Ahern 1997; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Piven 1985; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986).\(^5\) There are two reasons that women may be more liberal on these issues than men. One view states that women are more caring and concerned for the disadvantaged than men due to gender differences in socialization (Gilligan 1982). However, support for social welfare policies may also reveal a more self-interested motivation since women tend to benefit more from such programs than men (Erie and Rein 1988; Piven 1985). For either or both reasons, women hold more liberal views on the government’s role in providing social welfare programs—a policy preference that helps produce the gender gap and results in such issues being labeled women’s issues (Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler 1998).

I focus here specifically on the issues of education, child care, and health care and refer to this subset of issues as women’s issues. Candidates are likely to consider women’s issues important in targeting women for two reasons. First, these issues tend to be a higher priority for women than they are for men and women are more likely to use these issues as a basis for judging candidates (Koch 2002a). For instance, the 2000 VNS Exit Poll asked respondents to choose which issue was most important in affecting their presidential vote choice. Figure 1 compares the responses of male and female respondents on this question. Men were much more likely than women to cite taxes and economic issues while there was no discernable difference between the priorities of men and women on world affairs, social security, and Medicare. On the other hand, women were far more likely than men to cite health care and education as their most important issue.\(^6\) And while child care was not addressed in this survey, analyses of other surveys indicate that women tend to be more concerned about child care than men.\(^7\) Thus, because women are more likely to be affected by issues relating to education, health care, and child care, they tend to place more importance on those issues.

The second reason that candidate strategies will take women’s issues into account is because of the gender differences in attitudes on these topics. The 2000 General Social Survey asked respondents whether the federal government spends too much, too little, or just about the right amount of money dealing with each of these issues. According to this survey, each issue produced significant gender differences among men and women. Compared to men, women were 7% more likely to think that the government spent too little on education, 8% more likely to think that too little was being spent on health care, and 12% more likely to think that too little was spent on child care. Since the Democratic Party tends to be viewed as wanting to spend more money on these types of problems, these patterns would put women closer to the Democratic Party than men on these issues.\(^8\) Thus, women are more likely to place a higher priority on education, health care, and child care issues and they are more likely to favor the Democratic Party’s approach to those issues.

Given the gender differences on these issues, Democratic candidates wishing to make appeals to women voters should increase their focus on social welfare issues. Such a strategy may increase their support among women who are more likely to support the Democrats’ positions.

---

\(^5\) Some research also identifies gender differences in attitudes toward foreign policy (Conover 1988; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986).

\(^6\) As a more stringent test, I used logistic regression to examine the influence of gender on whether a respondent chose a woman’s issue as most important. In this model, I controlled for the presidential vote choice of the respondent, but gender remained strongly significant and women were over 12% more likely to cite a woman’s issue as most important to their vote.

\(^7\) For example, in a February 2003 Pew Research Center Survey, respondents were asked about how concerned they were with regard to a number of different issues. Of those with children, 44.3% of women respondents were very concerned about not having adequate child care while only 31.4% of male respondents reported being very concerned.

\(^8\) On the other hand, in the same survey, women were just as likely as men to say that taxes were too high and they held similar attitudes as men on issues such as abortion.
on those issues. Republican candidates concerned about women voters should focus their attention away from the same issues. However, when developing a strategy on whether to prime women’s issues, candidates are also constrained by the electorate’s existing priorities. Candidates must be careful to balance their desires to campaign on issues that they perform well on with the desires of citizens to see certain issues addressed (Just, Crigler, and Wallach 1996). For example, in the 1992 presidential election, voters were overwhelmingly concerned about the struggling economy. Understanding that the issue was not favorable for his candidacy, Bush largely ignored addressing it in an attempt to focus the electorate’s attention on foreign policy and family values instead. This strategy proved detrimental as Bush’s avoidance of the issue reinforced the public’s perception that he was out of touch (Just, Crigler, and Wallach 1996). The lesson to politicians is that the public is not a blank slate—candidates must be mindful of the issue priorities of the electorate when developing their priming strategies.

In summary, I expect candidates to consider a number of factors when determining whether and how to target women. Facing uncertainty over the likely outcomes of pursuing different approaches, candidates are likely to draw on various sources of information in determining their strategies. Candidates may learn whether appeals to women are beneficial or harmful by observing how gender gaps affected recent campaigns. They may also feel more or less confident about appealing to women depending on their own gender. Ultimately, Democratic candidates who decide to target women are more likely to use their campaigns to prime women’s issues while Republicans will attempt to draw attention away from those topics and toward other issues. But candidates from both parties are also constrained by the electorate’s prevailing issue concerns. In the following analysis, I examine how these factors affect the issues candidates highlight in their advertisements.

Analyzing Campaign Advertising Strategies

To analyze campaign strategies, I use the WiscAds data on campaign advertising from 30 Senate campaigns in 2000 (Goldstein, Franz, and Ridout 2002).9 Campaign advertising provides a good measure of the issue focus of campaigns because campaign advertisements are expensive to produce and air, so candidates want to focus their ads on issues that are central to their campaigns (West 2001). The advertising data include information about each of the 241,497 Senate advertisements that aired on network or cable television in 64 of the top 75 media markets during the 2000 campaign.10 The dataset includes information for each time that an advertisement aired in each market—if a single advertisement was produced by a campaign and aired 100 times, there would be 100 observations for that advertisement in the dataset. Each advertisement was coded across a number of measures. However, most important for this project are the measures of which candidate sponsored the advertisement, in which market the ad appeared, and which issues were mentioned in the ad.

As discussed above, strategic decisions about campaign advertising are made depending on the type of race, the type of candidate, and the intended audience in the television market. Therefore, the unit of analysis for this portion of the study is a candidate-market dyad. Each dyad is a pairing of a television market included in the WiscAds dataset and a candidate running in a state that overlaps with that market. A single market may be in more than one dyad, since that market may dominate portions of a number of different states. Likewise, any one candidate may be in multiple dyads since a number of different markets may overlap with his or her state. For example, the dataset includes 10 observations for the Virginia Senate race; one observation for each candidate in the five markets from the dataset that cover at least a portion of Virginia. Furthermore, in addition to being included in two observations for the Virginia Senate race, the Washington, D.C. market also covers portions of two other states with competitive Senate campaigns in 2000—Maryland and Pennsylvania. Thus, there are six dyads included for the Washington, D.C. market in this analysis. Overall, the model includes 60 major party Senate candidates in 30 states and the dyadic unit of analysis allows for an estimation of variations in strategies across campaigns, candidates, and media markets.

A candidate’s campaign advertising strategy is a combination of decisions. Of interest for this paper are decisions about whether to run advertisements at all and, if so, which issues to focus on. To estimate this two-stage decision-making process, I use a Heckman Selection Model (Heckman 1979). The Heckman model is appropriate in this case because the factors affecting whether

---

9 Excluding West Virginia and Arizona because there was only a single major party candidate in those states. Hawaii is also excluded because there was no market coverage for that state. More information about the WiscAds dataset is available online at http://polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising.

10 The remaining 13 markets were in states without a Senate race in 2000.
a candidate runs advertisements are often different than the factors affecting the issue focus of those ads, but the first decision affects the second.\footnote{The Heckman model uses a two-stage estimation to control for selection bias. The first stage is the selection model, which uses a probit estimation to gauge the likelihood that each case (censored or noncensored) will be selected. The procedure then uses this estimate to produce an expected value of the error term in the second-stage equation. By estimating the value of the error term and including it as an additional explanatory variable, the Heckman estimation removes the part of the error that is correlated with the independent variables. Removing this source of error avoids the bias introduced by the selection procedure (Greene 1997).} The dependent variable in the selection model is simply a measure of whether the candidate ran any advertisements in that particular market. Of the 180 dyads, candidates aired advertisements in 100. The outcome stage of the Heckman model estimates the dependent variable measuring the percentage of advertisements mentioning women’s issues—education, childcare, and/or healthcare.\footnote{The WiscAds project coded up to four campaign themes from each ad. I defined an ad as mentioning women’s issues if one or more of these four themes included education, lottery for education, child care, other child-related issues, and health care. Thus, this measure would include ads that simply mentioned one of these issues along with other nonrelated topics as well as including ads that focused primarily on one of these issues. More information about the coding process is available online at http://polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising.} In the 100 dyads in which advertisements were aired, the percentage of ads focusing on women’s issues ranged from 0% in 6 dyads to 100% in 13 dyads.

As mentioned above, the selection stage of the Heckman model is a modified probit estimation of whether or not each candidate ran advertisements in a particular market. I include five independent variables in this estimation. First, I include a measure of the cost of advertising in each market.\footnote{The WiscAds dataset contains the estimated cost of each advertisement based on the market information on the average cost of an ad during the time during which that ad aired. This variable uses that information to create an estimated average cost of all political advertisements aired in each market during the 2000 campaign and ranges from $208.63 per spot in the Mobile-Pensacola market to $2,948.14 per advertisement in New York City.} I expect that as advertising in a market becomes more expensive, candidates are less likely to purchase ads. Second, controlling for the average cost of advertising in a market, candidates who have more campaign funding should be more likely to run ads. Therefore, I include a variable measuring the amount of money candidates raised for their campaigns.\footnote{This information comes from the Center for Responsive Politics and includes all receipts from the 2000 campaign.} Third, I include a variable measuring the percentage of a state’s population that can be reached by each market. As a market reaches a larger percentage of a state’s population, candidates should become more likely to advertise in that market since there is an opportunity to reach more voters.\footnote{Market boundaries are determined by the Nielsen company based on the media outlets that dominate each county in the United States. To create the measure of a state’s population dominated by a market, I simply took the market’s population and divided it by the state’s population.} Finally, I include two dummy variables measuring the competitiveness of the Senate campaign.\footnote{These ratings were based on those published by the September 29, 2000 Cook Political Report. One variable is coded (1) for campaigns that Cook categorized as “toss ups,” and the other for campaigns categorized as “leaning” toward either party.} When campaigns are more competitive, candidates should be more likely to run campaign advertisements.

The outcome stage of the Heckman model includes the dependent variable measuring the percentage of a candidate’s ads in each market that focused on women’s issues. The independent variables in this model are mostly different from those in the selection model. The one variable I include in both stages of the model is that measuring the amount of money raised by the candidates. Since candidates with more money may be able to produce a wider variety of ads, they may also be more likely to produce ads that mention women’s issues. I introduce a number of other variables in the model as well. First, I include a measure of the liberalism of the television market since women’s issues may be more appealing to a more Democratic audience. This measure is the percentage of the two-party presidential vote won by Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election and ranges from just 28% in the Salt Lake City market to 68% in San Francisco.\footnote{I created this measure by using county-level presidential vote results and building up to the market level. Television markets rarely split counties.} A second variable in the model captures the percentage of Annenberg National Election Survey respondents in each state that cited one of the three women’s issues when asked about the most important problem facing this country (Romer et al. 2004).\footnote{The Annenberg Survey was ideal for creating this measure since they surveyed a large number of voters in each state before the general election campaigns began in those states. The dataset provided the open-ended responses to the most important problem question which I then coded according to whether they mentioned women’s issues as I have defined them.} I included survey responses captured from December 14th, 1999 through July 17th, 2000 to gauge the importance of women’s issues in each state’s electorate before the general election campaigns began. The percentage of respondents citing women’s issues during this period ranged from 16% in Mississippi to 34% in Maine.

Third, I use two dummy variables to account for whether the candidate is an incumbent, a challenger, or...
contesting an open seat. While differences in the type of candidate may not affect the focus on women’s issues per se, it is likely to influence the amount of campaigning on policy issues compared to appeals based on personal characteristics. Specifically, incumbents and challengers may be more likely to make issue-based appeals since the incumbents are likely to tout their issue accomplishments while the challenger may try to exploit other parts of the incumbent’s record. On the other hand, candidates competing for an open seat are likely to have less of a policy background and record to focus on (Sellers 1998). Five campaigns in this analysis (32 dyads) were for open Senate seats.

A fourth variable in the model is a dummy variable indicating whether the candidate is a Democrat (1) or a Republican (0). The fifth independent variable in the selection-stage model is a dummy variable indicating whether the candidate is female (1) or male (0). Six women ran for Senate in 2000 (four Democrats and two Republicans), and they comprised 22 dyads in the model. Sixth, I include a final dummy variable that indicates whether a gender gap had been the deciding factor in a previous senatorial or gubernatorial election in each state. This variable is coded (1) for the 78 dyads in states where a candidate won a statewide election during the previous six years but would not have done so without a gender gap (0 otherwise).

Finally, I include variables accounting for two potential interactions between variables. First, I include a variable accounting for an interaction between the party and gender of each candidate. Because partisan and gender stereotypes often conflict, Republican women may focus less on women’s issues than Democratic women (Koch 2002b; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Second, I include a variable accounting for the party of each candidate and whether a gender gap had previously been decisive in the state. I include this interaction because when a gender gap had been decisive, I expect the Democratic candidate to run a higher percentage of advertisements focusing on women’s issues while the Republican candidate will want to focus attention on other topics.19

Results

Table 1 presents the results from both the selection and outcome stages of the Heckman model analyzing campaign advertising strategies. The results of most interest are those for the outcome model. However, I begin by briefly discussing the results from the selection model. The coefficient for the cost of advertising is in the expected direction, but lacks statistical significance. On the other hand, the coefficient for a candidate’s fundraising was significant and positive, indicating that candidates with more money were more likely to run advertisements. Finally, both the reach of the market and the competitiveness of the campaign also affect the likelihood that candidates will advertise. Candidates are more likely to advertise in markets that reach a larger share of the state’s population and when the campaign is more competitive.

While the selection model revealed the strategic considerations made by candidates deciding whether to advertise, the outcome model captures the strategic considerations affecting the extent to which candidates targeted women voters by running ads mentioning women’s issues. First, the variable measuring the liberalism of the market lacks statistical significance in the model. Candidates do not appear to tailor their messages differently depending on the political balance of the market’s audience. One reason for this finding may be that the number of television markets dominating a state is often limited. Thus, Senate candidates have less ability to tailor their message to a specific audience since they have few choices when it comes to markets in which they may air advertisements. On the other hand, whether the candidate is an incumbent, a challenger, or vying for an open seat was a statistically significant factor. Specifically, incumbents and challengers run similar shares of their advertisements on women’s issues, but they run substantially more ads mentioning those issues than open seat candidates. As mentioned above, this finding is likely an indication that because of the incumbent’s record, incumbents and challengers are more likely to run on any issues than open seat candidates.

The key variables measure the extent to which candidates adjust their strategies based on various sources of information. The coefficient for the variable measuring the percentage of the state’s population that cited a women’s issue as most important was statistically significant, signifying that Senate candidates do take into account the issue priorities of the state’s population when formulating their advertising strategies. The coefficient indicates that for each additional 1% of survey respondents that said a women’s issue was one of the most important problems facing the country, each candidate focused 3.7% more of their advertisements on those issues. This effect is very strong and demonstrates that candidates are highly attentive to discussing the issues of concern to potential voters. In other words, the process of priming and agenda setting in a campaign is not as simple as candidates telling

---

19I also tested an interaction between the party of the candidate and the percentage of the state’s respondents citing women’s issues as most important to them. However, the interaction was not statistically significant so I excluded the variable from the final model.
TABLE 1  Modeling Focus on Women’s Issues in Campaign Ads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>(SE)</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selection Equation (Ran Ads)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of Advertising</td>
<td>-.0004</td>
<td>(.0002)</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of State Reached</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>(.01)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toss-up State</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>(.32)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaning State</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>(.31)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money Raised (in 100,000s)</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>(.003)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-1.51</td>
<td>(.29)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome Equation (% Women’s Issues)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money Raised (in 100,000s)</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>(.03)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberalism of Market</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>(.30)</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% MIP Women’s Issues</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>(.84)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>23.67</td>
<td>(8.18)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger</td>
<td>30.78</td>
<td>(8.41)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Candidate</td>
<td>-27.38</td>
<td>(12.17)</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Candidate</td>
<td>-3.73</td>
<td>(10.18)</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap Previously Decisive</td>
<td>-20.34</td>
<td>(9.14)</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female × Democrat</td>
<td>34.79</td>
<td>(14.64)</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisive × Democrat</td>
<td>33.04</td>
<td>(14.17)</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-49.76</td>
<td>(24.37)</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arctangent of Rho</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>(.24)</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log Likelihood</td>
<td>-533.20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model includes 180 observations, 100 uncensored. F-test for joint significance of candidate gender, candidate party and interaction is 5.94 (p < .15). F-test for joint significance of previous decisiveness of gender gap, candidate party and interaction is 14.74 (p < .01). Coefficients and standard errors estimated using Heckman Selection Model.

While the issue concerns of citizens appear to have some role in affecting candidates’ advertising strategies, additional factors may also have an influence. To examine these effects, I turn to the interactions between party and candidate gender and party and gender gap history. The coefficients for both interaction terms are significant, though joint tests of significance indicate that the interactive effects of party and candidate gender fail to attain statistical significance. Predicted effects indicate that Democratic women ran marginally higher percentages of advertisements focusing on women’s issues compared to Democratic men (60.0% and 47.7%, respectively) while the differences were much larger among Republican candidates. Republican males ran a similar percentage of advertisements focusing on women’s issues as Democrats (49.9%). However, particularly notable is the fact that Republican women focused only 22.5% of their advertisements on women’s issues. As mentioned earlier, one reason for the difference in strategies by Democratic and Republican women may be due to the challenges presented by gender and partisan stereotypes. Republican female candidates have a particularly difficult time with these stereotypes since they tend to send conflicting messages to voters about the candidate’s ideology (Koch 2002b). However, it is important to note that these findings are only suggestive since the joint tests cast doubt on the interactive effects of party and candidate gender and the sample includes only two female Republican candidates (Olympia Snowe (R-ME) and Kay Bailey Hutchinson (R-TX)).

Statistical tests indicate very high levels of confidence in the interactive effects of the candidate’s party and whether the gender gap had been previously decisive in the state. Figure 2 presents the predicted effects of this interaction while holding the other variables at their means. Recall that candidates already take into account the issue priorities of the state’s population when determining their
advertising strategies. But do candidates also take into account the electoral history in a state? Figure 2 indicates that when the gender gap had not been decisive in a recent contest, there was little difference between Democrats and Republicans on the percentage of advertisements focusing on women’s issues (47.5% and 51.2%, respectively). However, when the gender gap had played a decisive role in a recent statewide campaign, Democrats and Republicans acted quite differently. Under this condition, Democrats run nearly twice as many advertisements (60.2%) focusing on women’s issues as Republicans (30.9%). Thus, it appears as though Senate candidates pay quite a bit of attention to previous campaigns and act accordingly. Democrats become more likely to focus on women’s issues when a gender gap had worked for a Democrat in the past while Republicans work to shift attention away from such issues. After all, for every Democrat that benefited from a gender gap, there is a Republican who could blame it for his or her loss.

In sum, this analysis indicates that Senate candidates act strategically when making decisions about whether to advertise and on what issues to focus those advertisements. Particularly notable is the influence that the state’s current issue priorities and recent campaign history has by reducing the uncertainty that candidates have in pursuing these strategies. Candidates run a higher percentage of advertisements focusing on women’s issues when the state’s population is more concerned with those issues. In this way, candidates try to match their message to what voters want to hear about. But candidates also learn from past campaigns. The advertising strategies of Democrats and Republicans diverge when a gender gap had been decisive in a recent statewide campaign. In this context, Democrats focus more on women’s issues while Republicans attempt to steer the electorate’s attention elsewhere.

But where do Republican candidates attempt to focus the electorate’s attention in this situation? Figure 3 presents the difference in the percentage of advertisements run by Republicans on other topics (those not dealing with women’s issues) depending on whether a gender gap had been decisive in a recent statewide contest. When the gender gap had been decisive in a recent statewide contest, Republicans largely appeared to shift their focus to issues that are more important to male voters or they did not focus on policy issues at all. The shift in focus largely centered on three different topics. First, note that when a gender gap had been decisive in a previous campaign, nearly 20% of Republican candidates’ advertisements focused on non-policy topics such as trust, personality, and morality. On the other hand, when the gender gap had not recently been decisive in a state, the Republican candidates ran fewer than 4% of their ads on these topics. This substantial difference indicates that when Republicans believe they are at a disadvantage on women’s issues, part of their strategy involves avoiding policy issues altogether, choosing instead to make appeals based on values.
or their personal characteristics. By focusing on personality rather than policy, Republicans may be hoping to avoid topics that will alienate women.

Second, while Republicans already run a high percentage (19%) of advertisements on taxes when the gender gap has not been decisive in a recent campaign, such ads become an even more important part of their advertising strategy when they turn away from women’s issues (31%). Women are just as likely as men to believe that their taxes are too high, though men place more importance on tax issues. Thus, Republicans may use the tax issue as a method of appealing to male voters while not alienating women. While women may not place as much importance on the tax issue as men, they also do not have differing opinions on the topic, so Republican appeals on this issue are less likely to drive women away.

Third, Republicans also appear to increase their focus on the topic of crime from 9% when the gender gap had not been previously decisive to 15% when it had been. This strategy may be driven by the fact that women tend to be more fearful of crime than men and Republicans are often viewed as the party that is more capable of handling this issue (Petrock 1996). By focusing more attention on crime, Republicans may be better suited to compete for women voters. On the other hand, this strategy may also be aimed at male voters since men tend to be more supportive of the punitive approach to crime taken by Republicans rather than the preventative approach favored by women (Hurwitz and Smithey 1998). Thus, Republicans view crime as another alternative topic for their campaign advertisements when they are determined to focus the electorate’s attention away from women’s issues.

Finally, it is important to note the differences in the Republican focus on Social Security depending on whether a gender gap had been previously decisive. When a gender gap had been previously decisive, Republicans actually focused slightly less on Social Security (6% fewer advertisements). This finding may indicate that Republicans view social security as another topic on which they are likely to perform worse among women compared to Democrats. In fact, when a gender gap had cost a Republican victory in a previous campaign, Republican candidates appeared to focus away from social welfare issues in general, not just away from women’s issues.

The findings presented above indicate that candidates act very strategically when it comes to determining how much attention to pay to women’s issues. By focusing attention on or away from these topics in their advertisements, candidates are hoping to either prime those issues in the minds of voters or draw the electorate’s attention elsewhere. But to what extent do these strategies actually influence voters? Does the issue content of campaigns affect the vote choices of women (or men)? In the following section, I analyze whether the issue focus of campaigns truly has an influence on the effect of gender on the vote.

**Campaign Focus and the Effect of Gender on Vote Decisions**

To examine the influence of campaigns on the relationship between gender and vote choice, I combine the campaign advertising data analyzed above with VNS exit polls from 2000.20 I use the VNS exit polls to examine the influence of gender on vote choice while controlling for partisanship. A great deal of research has shown that since women are more likely to identify themselves as Democrats, there is no significant gender difference in voting behavior after controlling for party affiliation (Cook and Wilcox 1995; Kenski 1998; Wirls 1986). Indeed, in the VNS sample used for this analysis, women were 11.4% more likely to identify themselves as Democrats and 7.1% less likely to affiliate with the Republican Party. Yet, campaigns tend to influence the vote choices made by citizens, not necessarily their standing party loyalties. Thus, to produce a convincing test of how campaigns affect the influence of gender on vote choice, I control for the party affiliation of respondents.

To determine the issue themes in a Senate campaign, I use the campaign advertising data analyzed above. Unlike the analysis of candidates’ strategies, I include the issue content of all advertisements run for the Senate campaign, including those sponsored by parties and interest groups. The inclusion of all ads provides a more accurate measure of the balance of messages to which voters were exposed.21 While I am not testing for the direct influence of advertisements on respondents, these campaign ads provide a good indication of the focus of campaigns because they feature similar issues as those covered by the news media during

---

20 Despite the well-publicized failure of the VNS polls in 2000, exit polls are the most accurate way to examine voting behavior because they minimize the likelihood that respondents may misstate their vote choices or report that they voted when they did not do so (Wright 1993). In this case, the exit polls also add the benefit of a sufficiently large sample for each Senate race compared to the National Election Study, which only interviews a handful of respondents in each state.

21 The results in the analysis do not differ depending on whether only the candidates advertisements are included or if advertisements sponsored by candidates, parties, and interest groups are all included. The different formulations of the measure were highly correlated (.93).
Table 2  Probit Model of Senate Vote Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>(SE)</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-1.09</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>(.02)</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>(.03)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbency</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>(.03)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Ads Mention Women’s issues</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>(.22)</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender × % Ads Mention Women’s issues</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>(.29)</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>(.16)</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 3553</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log Likelihood = −1511.36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F-test for joint significance of percentage of ads focusing on women’s issues, respondent gender and interaction is 14.67 (p < .01).

Source: Voter New Service Exit Polls.

Results

Table 2 presents the results from the probit model of Senate vote choice. The variable for the Senate vote is coded 1 if the respondent voted for the Democratic candidate and 0 for the Republican candidate. This analysis does not test of the effects of advertising on vote choice. Rather, the variable for the percentage of advertisements focusing on women’s issues is used to estimate the focus on women’s issues in the campaign as a whole.

22It is important to note that this analysis does not test of the effects of advertising on vote choice. Rather, the variable for the percentage of advertisements focusing on women’s issues is used to estimate the focus on women’s issues in the campaign as a whole.

24When discussing the predicted effects of the independent variables, the probability estimates were generated while holding all other variables at their means.
and 0 if he or she voted for the Republican. Not surprisingly, the results from the model indicate that voters were more likely to vote for incumbent candidates and that single voters, voters with lower incomes, nonwhite voters, and more educated voters were all more likely to vote Democratic. The role of partisanship on the vote was also very strong with partisans being much more likely to vote for their party’s nominee. Respondents affiliating with the Democratic Party were 85% likely to vote for the Democratic Senate candidate, independents were 46% likely to do so, and Republicans were just 12% likely to vote Democratic.

The variable of interest, however, is that for gender. Specifically, the model in Table 2 tests whether the focus on women’s issues affects the likelihood that women and men will vote Democratic. The coefficient for the interaction of gender and campaign focus is positive and significant and the predicted effects are presented in Figure 4. As women’s issues became a more dominant theme in the campaign, women became increasingly likely to vote for the Democratic candidate. For example, according to the predicted effects generated with all other variables held at their means, when 40% of the advertisements in a Senate campaign mentioned women’s issues, women were 48% likely to vote for the Democratic candidate. On the other hand, women were 53% likely to vote for the Democratic candidate when 60% of the ads in a race mentioned on women’s issues. Thus, as campaigns focused more attention on women’s issues, women became increasingly likely to vote Democratic.

But were Democratic gains among women offset by losses among men? The results presented in Figure 4 suggest that this is not the case. The predicted effects indicate that the vote choices of men are not influenced by the degree to which the campaign focused on women’s issues. Men may not be affected by the campaign’s focus on women’s issues for two reasons mentioned above. First, men are less likely to be undecided so campaigns will have less of an impact on their votes. Second, men tend to find women’s issues less salient so they are less likely to base their vote decisions on those issues, even when they become more prevalent in the campaign. Regardless of the reason, male support or opposition for the Democratic candidate did not appear to waver based on the prevalence of women’s issues in the campaign.

These findings indicate that campaigns can affect the role of gender on the vote even when controlling for influence of party affiliation and other socioeconomic factors. More importantly, the strategy of focusing on women’s issues appears to influence the vote choices of women but not men. This finding is not entirely surprising given that men tend to make up their minds earlier and are less likely to be influenced by campaigns. Nevertheless, this suggests that Democratic candidates need not consider a potential tradeoff between winning the votes of women at the expense of losing men. I discuss these implications in more detail below.

**Conclusion**

My analysis indicates that candidates determine whether and how to target women voters by using available information to reduce the uncertainty involved in choosing their campaign messages. Though strategic decisions made during campaigns have uncertain consequences, candidates deal with this uncertainty in two ways. First, candidates learn from past campaigns to understand what produces a successful (or unsuccessful) electoral strategy. Depending on whether a gender gap had been decisive in previous statewide campaigns, candidates will determine whether they should target women voters. Second, candidates appear to be very good at understanding which issues the electorate is most concerned about and addressing those issues in their campaign advertisements. In this case, when a higher percentage of the state’s population listed women’s issues as the problems that most concerned them, candidates of either party focused more on those issues in their campaign advertisements.

Thus, candidates appear to be very responsive to the issue priorities of the electorate when formulating their own campaign agendas. But within the constraints of these existing priorities, candidates do attempt to prime women’s issues when it is likely to benefit them and avoid those issues when a gender gap would be detrimental. Indeed, Democrats and Republicans focused relatively equal
attention on women’s issues in their campaign advertisements when the gender gap had not played a decisive role in recent statewide elections. However, when there was a history of elections turning on the presence of a gender gap, the strategies of Democrats and Republicans diverged, with Republicans attempting to focus the electorate’s attention on issues that were more gender neutral.

Importantly, this strategic behavior does not appear to be without consequence. When women’s issues were a bigger part of the campaign discourse, women became more likely to vote for Democratic candidates. On the other hand, the vote decisions of men were not influenced by the prevalence of women’s issues on the campaign agenda. In short, campaigning on women’s issues matters, but only for women. This finding may suggest a dominant strategy for Democratic candidates—target women voters by discussing women’s issues (Koch 1999). After all, if this strategy does not come with the opportunity costs of losing support among men, then the Democrat should always benefit by pursuing it. Republicans, on the other hand, must work to shift the campaign agenda away from the social welfare issues that allow Democratic candidates to pick up this support from women. My findings indicate that they attempt to do this by shifting attention to issues of personality, morality, and crime.

Ultimately, understanding these strategic decisions and their electoral consequences provides for a better understanding of the gender gap. Rather than acting as a constant force in American elections, the influence of gender on voting decisions appears to be affected by the strategic choices made by candidates. While gender differences exist on a range of issues, there are also many topics on which men and women hold similar preferences. Indeed, there is no inherent reason that women’s issues should divide the electorate as they have since 1980. But the strategic choices made by candidates often create this division. Understanding that women comprise a large share of undecided voters, Democratic candidates often target them by stressing issues on which there are differences. Republicans may resist this agenda shift and concentrate on issues where there are fewer differences. This tug of war over the campaign agenda is a critical factor in explaining the voting behavior of women in any given election.

Finally, the fact that candidates take account of women voters when formulating their campaign strategies is also important when considering the successes of the women’s movement. As the gender gap became a persistent force in American elections in the early 1980s, many feminist groups publicized gender disparities in voting behavior to generate more influence for women voters (Barakso 2004; Mueller 1988). These groups argued that since women appeared to be voting differently from men, it was in candidates’ interest to take their concerns into account. The findings in this article indicate that candidates took heed of this publicity and do pay a great deal of attention to women voters when devising their strategies, particularly when women have been a decisive force in previous campaigns. As a result, candidates are more likely to address women’s concerns during campaigns, which increase their likelihood of addressing those issues once in office.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Office</th>
<th>Democratic Candidate Who Won</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Dianne Feinstein</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Barbara Boxer</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FL</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>Lawton Chiles</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GA</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Max Cleland</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>John Kerry</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>Parris Glendening</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>Parris Glendening</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MN</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Paul Wellstone</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Max Baucus</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NE</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Bob Kerrey</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Frank Lautenberg</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NM</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Jeff Bingaman</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NV</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Richard Bryan</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NY</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Charles Schumer</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VA</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Charles Robb</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Center for American Women in Politics. The states listed above were those in which a gender gap had previously been decisive in a statewide election. This table includes only information for those states included in the analysis in Table 1.
References


