

Study: Male voice-overs dominate political ads, but women's voices may be more effective

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Patricia Strach of Political Science and Public Administration & Policy. Credit: Mark Schmidt

In political ads, it seems that men and women are not created equal, according to research on the selection of voice-over announcers in campaign and political broadcast advertising.

In the study, "In a Different Voice? Explaining the Use of Men and Women as Voice-over Announcers in Political Advertising" published in *Political Communication*, author Patricia Strach, an associate professor of Political Science and Public Administration & Policy at UAlbany, and a team of researchers find that male voice-overs still dominate the airwaves during the political season, yet [women](#)'s voices can be used strategically, with success.

The research team examined some 7,000 unique [political ads](#) during the 2010-12 U.S. Congressional elections and learned that, true to patterns in both politics and advertising, campaigns chose to employ male voice-overs more than twice as often as female voices—about 63 percent male to 28 percent female, while nine percent used both genders.

However, the team found that the campaigns' choices of voice-overs poked surprising holes in gender and political strategy stereotypes, including:

- Male candidates were more likely than female candidates to use women to voice their ads.
- Republicans were more likely to use a woman's voice than were Democrats. However, the more Democratic the district or state, the more likely the ad featured a woman's voice-over, suggesting that audience characteristics enter into campaigns' choices about the content of ads.
- Democrats did not perceive women's voices to be significantly more credible than did Republicans.

"One of our most striking findings is also the most basic—men's voices dominate [political advertising](#) by more than a two-to-one ratio," Strach said. "However, we can find no good reason for this disparity. In many circumstances, men and women as voice-over announcers are equally effective. And, at times, it is more advantageous to use women's voices."

Additional findings showed that some gender and credibility stereotypes remain strong, and women's voice-overs offered an advantage. The study also concluded:

- Women were more likely to be used as voice-over announcers for negative and contrast ads than for positive ads, supporting the conventional campaign wisdom that women's voices should be used in attacks to minimize backlash.
- Female voice-overs were more often used when the topic was determined to be "feminine," such as child care or education, or when it was gender-neutral, while male voice-overs were used for so-called "masculine" issues such as foreign policy and national defense.
- Women's voices were more common when the ad was about a candidate's characteristics as opposed to policy issues, a finding consistent with research showing that women are frequently recognized for their personal characteristics rather than their policy knowledge or goals.

"The lesson is that smart campaigns should not default to using a man's voice for their advertising," Strach said. "Careful consideration of the circumstances under which to use [men's](#) and women's [voices](#) may lend the ad more credibility, and therefore more persuasion."

More information: Patricia Strach et al. In a Different Voice? Explaining the Use of Men and Women as Voice-Over Announcers in Political Advertising, *Political Communication* (2015). [DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2014.914614](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.914614)

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