

Letter

The Silenced Text: Field Experiments on Gendered Experiences of Political Participation

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Who gets to “speak up” in politics? Whose voices are silenced? We conducted two field experiments to understand how harassment shapes the everyday experiences of politics for men and women in the United States today. We randomized the names campaign volunteers used to text supporters reminders to participate in a protest and call their representatives. We find that female-named volunteers receive more offensive, silencing, and withdrawal responses than male-named or ambiguously named volunteers. However, supporters were also more likely to respond and agree to their asks. These findings help make sense of prior research that finds women are less likely than men to participate in politics, and raise new questions about whether individual women may be perceived as symbolic representatives of women as a group. We conclude by discussing the implications for gender equality and political activism.


In 2017, the Women’s Marches and #MeToo movement dramatically increased public attention paid to the harassment and silencing of women. In politics, the problem is widespread: relative to men, women politicians face more interruption (Och 2020), sexual harassment (Folke et al. 2020; Håkansson 2019), and psychological abuse (Herrick and Thomas 2022; Thomas et al. 2019). Women activists, journalists, and human rights defenders likewise face more threats and violence (Krook 2020; Sobieraj 2020). Yet the vast majority of research on violence against women in politics focuses on elite women—politicians, public figures, and federal prosecutors—those that Pitkin (1967) might call formal or substantive representatives of women.¹

This focus on elite women means that we know little about the treatment of the average woman—the voter, the volunteer, and the protester—when she enters the public sphere in the United States today. Research that considers harassment as a barrier to the average woman’s political participation focuses heavily on countries outside of the United States (e.g., Alam 2021; Krook 2020; Prillaman *Forthcoming*). Research on American women’s participation has examined barriers

like income and family responsibilities (Bernhard, Shames, and Teele 2021; Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1994), but this alone has been unable to explain why women are more likely than men to vote but less likely to participate in other political activities (Beauvais 2020). One possibility is that activities like protesting and canvassing make individual women into “symbolic” representatives who “stand for” women as a group in the eyes of others (Pitkin 1967, 92), increasing their risk of harassment.

Likewise, while many studies examine the consequences of incivility between elites for public opinion, here too we know little about gendered incivility between citizens (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014). Nor do we know whether incivility is a problem for an immensely popular new form of political activism: text canvassing. Text messages have been a boon for campaigns, allowing volunteers to contact more people, more cheaply, than ever before: more than 80 million political text messages were sent every day in September and October 2020 (Bajak and Burke 2020). In short, we know little about the experience of political activism in the United States today, let alone how women are treated when they participate. We, therefore, ask a simple question: are women more likely than men to receive hostile messages when they participate in politics?

To examine volunteers’ experiences, we conducted two field experiments in 2018 in which we randomized the apparent gender of volunteers during a texting (“Short Message Service,” or SMS) campaign meant to encourage a liberal organization’s supporters to attend rallies and call their representatives. Volunteers used a software program to rapidly text supporters standardized messages. Each supporter received a text message from a volunteer randomly assigned to use

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¹ See Appendix A of the Supplementary Material (SM) for a fuller review of this scholarship.

either a common male name, a female name, an ambiguously gendered name, or no name. Combining name manipulation with otherwise identical messages allows us to identify perceived gender as one cause of men and women's different experiences in politics (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004).

In both studies, female-named volunteers receive more offensive, silencing, and withdrawal responses than male-named or ambiguously named volunteers. This suggests backlash against women participating in political activism. In particular, these messages have a "generic" quality that Sobieraj (2020, 5) describes as a hallmark of structural abuse: abuse that treats individual women as representatives of all women. When someone texts "fuck off Jessica you're a slut," having no information about "Jessica" and despite "Jessica" using exactly the same text messages as "Michael" and "Taylor," we have evidence that the hostility is toward women as a group rather than some specific characteristic of this individual woman—who may not even be a woman volunteer, thanks to our experiment.

These findings are concerning since many barriers to participation already exist, especially for historically disadvantaged groups, and they help make sense of women's reluctance to participate in peer-oriented political activities like canvassing. Yet we also find hints that volunteers may be more effective when assigned to use female names. Our study thus raises new questions about women's equality in political life in the United States.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We conducted two randomized control trials in 2018 evaluating whether female-named volunteers receive more harassing SMS responses than male-named volunteers.² To do so, we partnered with a progressive political organization, NextGen America (NGA), to contact individuals who had previously interacted with the organization and agreed to be contacted again.³ NGA regularly texts supporters to contact their elected officials, take part in protests, and volunteer. Because these individuals have consented to contact from NGA, we expect them to be more civil toward NGA volunteers. Our estimates of the prevalence of hostile behavior should, therefore, be lower than if we had contacted respondents without their consent.

For each study, NGA selected the largest sample sizes they believed their volunteers could plausibly contact before a given deadline (e.g., before a rally). NGA contacted 60,356 individual supporters in the first trial, and 75,231 in the second.⁴ In Study 1, NGA texted supporters to encourage them to attend a local March for Our Lives rally; in Study 2, to call their representative to urge then-Environmental Protection Agency

administrator Scott Pruitt to resign. Volunteers were overwhelmingly women in both studies: 77.14% in Study 1, and 85.71% in Study 2, for an overall rate of 80.95%.

Design and Procedures

Following a design common to audit studies, to vary perceived gender, we randomly assigned supporters to receive an otherwise identical text message from a volunteer using either a stereotypically female name (Jessica), male name (Michael), ambiguously gendered name (Taylor), or no name. Both studies were double-blinded to reduce possible demand effects (among volunteers) and biases common to studying sensitive behaviors, such as social desirability bias (among respondents). Respondents knew only that they were being contacted by NGA, which they had previously opted into.

NGA's texting software ensured every initial SMS message to a respondent was standardized; Appendix B.3 of the SM provides the base message text. After the volunteer successfully texted a supporter, the software prompted them to send a new message to another, until the volunteer finished texting their allotment of supporters. The average volunteer sent approximately 1,300 messages.

Dependent Variables

We measure three main outcomes for replies to these messages: average offensiveness, silencing, and withdrawal.⁵ We measure offensiveness using questions we designed.⁶ In Study 1, volunteers reported when they felt a text they received was offensive. These were coded as 100 and all others as 0, allowing us to report averages in terms of percentage points. For Study 2, instead of the volunteer-reported measure, we recruited two independent coders to indicate how offensive a response was on a 5-point scale ranging from "non-offensive" (1) to "very offensive" (5).⁷

To compare offensiveness across studies, we recoded Study 2's existing 5-point offensiveness measure as a binary measure. To do so, we recoded a response as "offensive" (100) if either coder marked the response as anything other than "non-offensive," and inoffensive (0) otherwise. We do not find a significant difference in

² The SM provides the full materials.

³ Appendix B.1 of the SM provides more information.

⁴ We coded supporter gender using the "gender" package in R (see Appendix B.6.1 of the SM).

⁵ Appendix B.4.2 of the SM reports data for another dependent variable, discouragement, piloted in Study 2. Female-named volunteers received more discouraging replies, but the findings were not robust to alternate coding strategies.

⁶ We situate these variables more fully within the literatures on violence against women in politics (VAWIP) and gendered incivility in Appendix A.2 of the SM.

⁷ With two coders, we can assess how much perceived offensiveness might vary between two individuals looking at the same response. The Krippendorff's alpha for the two coders' scores was 0.73, suggesting acceptable inter-coder reliability. Kenski, Coe, and Rains (2020) also show women rate comments as less civil than men; we find no difference. See Appendix C.3 of the SM.

TABLE 1. Sample Responses and Response Rates by Category

Category	Rates	Examples
Offensive	Study 1 = 3.76% Study 2 = 6.59% Overall = 4.35%	"No. Your fat." "fuck off marching won't do shit except waste time." "my name is [NAME] you slut. what kind of stripper name is Jessica anyway."
Silencing	Study 1 = 2.22% Study 2 = 12.86% Overall = 4.44%	"bitch stfu" "STOP TEXTING" "Lose my number lady"
Withdrawals	Study 1 = 27.79% Study 2 = 36.46% Overall = 29.60%	"No thank you. Please, quit texting" "please remove me from these messages" "Stop"

the ratings for offensiveness between the two studies; we, therefore, depict the results for both studies below using the binary measure.⁸

NGA requires volunteers to immediately opt out anyone that asks not to be contacted or harasses a volunteer. In both studies, we use this indicator to measure withdrawals—polite or inoffensive requests not to be contacted again—and silencing: whether a respondent intimidates or harasses the volunteer into ceasing contact. Any response that requested an opt-out but was not coded as offensive is coded as 100 for withdrawal, and 0 otherwise. For a response to be coded as silencing (100), it must both opt out the respondent and be coded as offensive. This means that silencing messages represent the overlap between offensive and opt-out messages. Table 1 displays the rates (conditional on responding) and coded examples of each type of behavior. Offensive and silencing responses are relatively infrequent; withdrawals are more common.

Analysis

In the main paper, we provide figures based on ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions.⁹ These regressions estimate the treatment effect of assigning someone at phone number i to be contacted by a volunteer randomly assigned a particular name condition on the rate of offensive, silencing, or withdrawal replies.¹⁰ We employ the "ambiguous-gender" condition as the control condition because it strictly varies the gender cue relative to the clearly gendered male and female names.¹¹ In analyses that pool both studies,

we include a dummy variable for whether the respondent was in Study 1 (1) or Study 2 (0). In all tables and figures, we report 95% confidence intervals with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors; all p -values reported are two-tailed.

RESULTS

We conducted two field experiments to study the treatment of political volunteers. In each study, the only aspect of the message that varied was the gender of the name the volunteer used. In both studies, when volunteers are assigned a female name, they receive more offensive, silencing, and withdrawal responses than any other name condition. However, supporters were also more likely to respond and agree to asks made by female-named volunteers.

Offensiveness

In both studies, respondents were more likely to send offensive replies to volunteers assigned female names than those assigned male or ambiguous names. Figure 1 presents the OLS regression results overall (left-hand panel) and for each study individually (middle- and right-hand panels).¹² Across all three panels, we see the same pattern: respondents send more offensive messages to volunteers using female names. Overall, volunteers assigned to use female names are 0.177 percentage points more likely than ambiguously named volunteers to receive offensive messages during a campaign (two-tailed $p < 0.001$). Male-named volunteers were 0.097 percentage points less likely to receive offensive messages than the ambiguously named ($p = 0.002$). Unnamed individuals were also more likely (0.148 percentage points) to receive offensive messages ($p < 0.001$). For every 1,000 messages a female-named volunteer sends, she receives on average 1.77 more offensive messages than an ambiguously named texter, and 2.74 more offensive messages than a male-named

⁸ Section C.1.1 of the SM shows that the offensiveness results hold for both studies individually, for Study 2 when using either the binary or original 5-point scale measure, and for Study 1 using the volunteer-reported measures. Recoding simply enables easy comparison.

⁹ Appendix C.4 of the SM shows the results hold using logistic regressions.

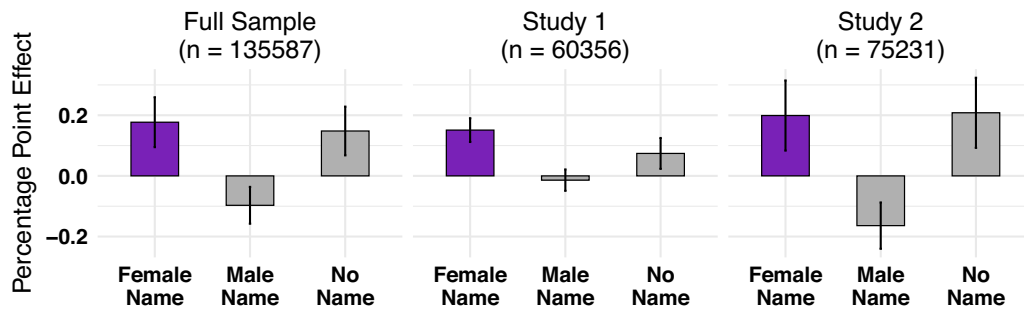
¹⁰ Appendix C.6 of the SM estimates the average treatment effect for treated phone numbers (those that NGA sent a message to, rather than all numbers) using instrumental variable regressions; these show substantially larger estimates.

¹¹ The no-name condition acts as a "pure" control by varying both the presence of a name and the gender cue associated with the name. Names may seem less like spam, generating friendlier responses. Additionally, previous literature suggests that anonymity and a lack

of names in particular can foster disinhibition online (Suler 2004), dehumanizing targeted individuals and leading to more toxic behaviors (Kteily et al. 2015).

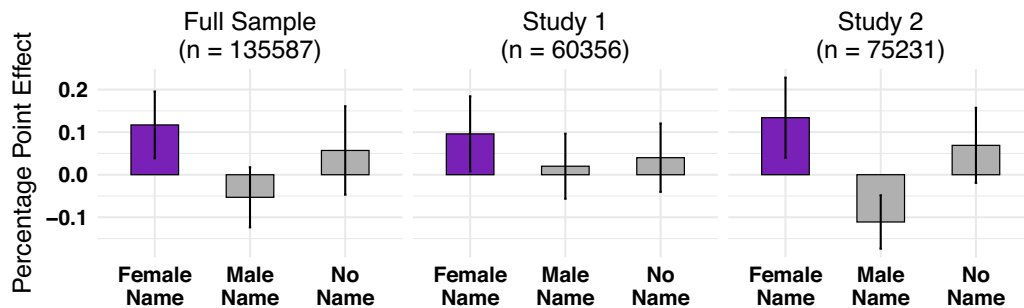
¹² Table S7 in the SM provides the regression estimates depicted. Table S22 in the SM replicates the analysis using logistic regression.

FIGURE 1. Mean Offensiveness



Note: The figure shows the average treatment effect by treatment condition with 95% confidence intervals estimated using ordinary least squares. The comparison category is the ambiguous name condition.

FIGURE 2. Mean Silencing



Note: The figure shows the average treatment effect by treatment condition with 95% confidence intervals estimated using ordinary least squares. The comparison category is the ambiguous name condition.

texter ($p < 0.001$ for both)—a 202% increase over the male-named base rate.

Silencing

Across both studies, supporters are more likely to silence female-named volunteers than all other named conditions, shown in Figure 2.¹³ Overall, respondents were 0.117 percentage points more likely to silence volunteers using a female name compared with those using an ambiguously gendered name (two-tailed $p < 0.001$), but 0.053 percentage points *less* likely to silence volunteers using male names (two-tailed $p = 0.034$). The difference means that respondents force female-named volunteers to end 1.70 more interactions—and all subsequent outreach—out of every 1,000 text messages: a 181% increase over male-named volunteers.

Withdrawals

In both studies, supporters are more likely to politely end all future outreach when contacted by female-named

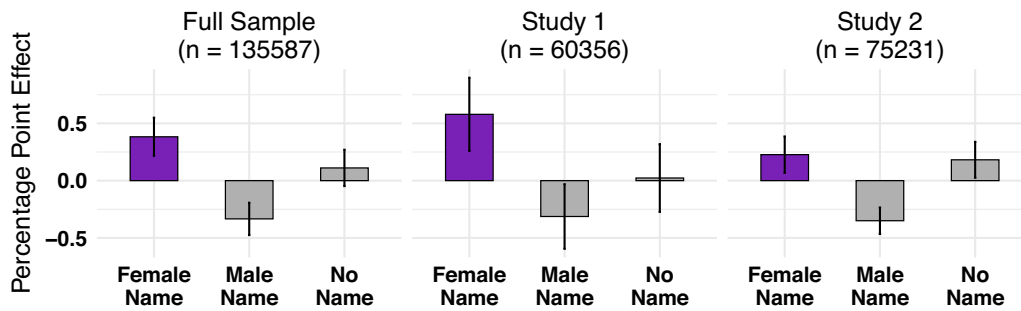
volunteers compared with male-named and ambiguously named volunteers, per Figure 3.¹⁴ Overall, respondents were 0.383 percentage points more likely to withdraw when volunteers used a female name compared with an ambiguously gendered name (two-tailed $p < 0.001$). In contrast, respondents were 0.334 percentage points *less* likely to withdraw from all future outreach when volunteers used a male name relative to those using an ambiguously gendered name ($p < 0.001$).

Looking across Outcomes

Female-named volunteers face increased hostility and decreased ability to engage in future activism, especially relative to male-named volunteers. Recall that in our sample, an average volunteer sent approximately 1,300 messages, so a volunteer consistently using a female name—as would be the case for many women—is likely to experience all of these individual behaviors. The unnamed volunteer fares similarly. Yet the volunteers assigned to use a female name are not “anonymous” like those assigned no name.

¹³ Table S8 in the SM provides the regression estimates depicted. Table S23 in the SM replicates the analysis using logistic regression.

¹⁴ Table S9 in the SM provides the regression estimates depicted. Table S24 in the SM replicates the analysis using logistic regression.

FIGURE 3. Mean Withdrawal

Note: The figure shows the average treatment effect by treatment condition with 95% confidence intervals estimated using OLS. The comparison category is the ambiguous name condition.

In the SM, we show that there is no significant difference in how male and female respondents treated the female-named volunteers (see Tables S7–S9 in the SM), though men are more likely to send offensive and silencing texts across all conditions, while women were more likely to withdraw across all conditions. Thus, while most hostile responses come from men, women also reserved more of their hostile responses for other women.

Notably, despite this poor treatment, we find no evidence that female-named volunteers were less effective than volunteers assigned other name conditions. Female-named volunteers obtain higher response rates and supporter commitments to call their representatives than the other name conditions, despite their higher likelihood of receiving offensive, silencing, and withdrawal responses (see Tables S13–S20 in the SM). We discuss the implications below.

DISCUSSION

Using two field experiments embedded in real political campaigns, we find evidence that volunteers using female names receive more offensive, silencing, and withdrawal responses than volunteers using ambiguously gendered names, who in turn receive more such messages than volunteers using male names. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that women are interrupted and harassed more (Krook 2020). However, few prior studies have documented whether such findings held for direct experiences of political participation and activism (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Sobieraj 2020). These findings underscore the importance of understanding how individual women may be seen as symbolic representatives of all women when they engage in advocacy (Pitkin 1967; Sobieraj 2020) and how this may make even non-elite women's experiences of participation different than men's. A woman activist who "stands for" other women may evoke more enthusiasm from those who want to see more women in politics—and more hostility from those who do not.

The findings are striking given that our sampling frame is composed of ideologically like-minded

individuals who previously shared their contact information with the organization. Our estimates, therefore, depict these behaviors within a "friendly" audience. We expect rates of uncivil behaviors to be much larger when the audience is not predisposed to be friendly. Indeed, many silencing and withdrawal responses come from individuals stating that the organization has the wrong number, that is, those who have not agreed to be contacted. However, rates of antisocial behaviors may differ depending on the medium of contact (e.g., face-to-face), so studying variation across mediums seems crucial.

Understanding how voters treat political volunteers is important since political participation and activism underpin democracy. Voter-to-voter canvassing is one of the only methods proven to durably move voter attitudes on sensitive political issues (Broockman and Kalla 2016). Moreover, texting is among the few outreach tools available to campaigns—and increasingly common. Our findings suggest that it may matter a great deal who is texting (or calling, or door-knocking). Nor can we offer a simple suggestion for campaigns: even though female-named volunteers experienced worse treatment, they received more responses and were more effective in getting respondents to commit to calling their representatives.

Our finding that women respondents are, like men, more hostile to female-named volunteers also merits further scrutiny. One possibility is that both men and women respondents are more fearful of attacking men than women. Another is that men's speech is privileged in the public sphere, such that both men and women discriminate against women who act politically (e.g., due to internalized sexism).¹⁵ Still another is that men's and women's goals in responding differ. Future research should map the mechanisms responsible.

Finally, the findings contribute to the growing literature on violence against women in politics by showing the importance of studying violence against everyday voters and activists (Krook 2020), not just public figures

¹⁵ This may be true even with gender cues as small as names: see Elder and Hayes (2023).

and politicians. More women are speaking up than ever before, from protests for Mahsa Amini in Iran, Women's Marches in the United States, and #NiUnaMenos/#MeToo activists in Chile. Many—not just highly visible elites like U.S. Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi—will experience violence for doing so. If women are discouraged early on by such experiences, they may never pursue a more formal political role.¹⁶

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000217>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/UYKE7T>.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

¹⁶ Though our study cannot assess whether being assigned a female name influences participants' decisions to volunteer again as volunteers send texts using all four names, future research might.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved by the University of California, Davis Institutional Review Board and determined to be exempt from review (Decision #1626820-1). The authors affirm that this article adheres to the APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research.

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