

The Power of Female Voters: Why The Eisenhower Campaign's Use of Television to Target Female Voters in the 1956 Election Matters

If an American in 2016 turned on their television, they would have been bombarded with political advertisements, most either made by or attacking a female presidential candidate, but 60 years earlier television campaigns and the idea that a woman would vote independently of her husband were novel thoughts. Americans were introduced to presidential TV advertisements in 1952, but these ads did not become critical to presidential campaigns until 1956. While watching an afternoon soap opera or the nightly news, in addition to advertisements for toys, cleaning supplies, and all the household gadgets every household needed, Americans saw ads encouraging them to vote for Dwight Eisenhower or Adlai Stevenson. In all, the Eisenhower and Stevenson campaigns spent millions of dollars creating and airing nine commercials each. The 1956 election was not significant just for this increased investment in campaigning through television ads. These commercials also showed a shift in how women were portrayed in advertisements and viewed as voters. The Eisenhower campaign created a series of advertisements that targeted female voters, which was the first time women and men were campaigned to separately. He did not just depict male taxi drivers and farmers, he also showed housewives and secretaries. The 1956 election was a turning point for presidential campaigning. It was the first time a campaign relied on television and Eisenhower's commercials show that women were finally treated as valuable voters.

In the 1956 presidential election, both parties used television advertisements to reach a wider audience, but the Republican Party devoted much more of their campaign to advertising because they believed in its effectiveness. Between the 1952 and 1956 elections, over 60 million additional Americans gained access to television as the percentage of homes with a TV grew

from 37% to 76%.¹ This growth in television usage meant that television had become a good medium for reaching the majority of the population. An additional benefit of television campaigning was that it would be easier on Eisenhower who had suffered a heart attack in September of 1955.² Eisenhower's questionable health would have prevented him from running just ten years prior, but, as Allen wrote, "television appears to have solved a problem in Eisenhower's 1956 campaign,"³ his health, because it allowed him to campaign from home. As reported in a New York Times article, "the word is: 'Ike will make absolutely no whistle-stop train trips'" and instead "the President will rely, as he said he would in his speech announcing his second-term candidacy, on 'mass communication' to get his message to the voters"⁴ The Republican account executive also told the reporter Kenworthy, "Television will be the backbone of the campaign" and the Director of Public Relations for the National Committee announced, "We are planning a national saturation radio and TV campaign."⁵ As these quotes demonstrate, the Eisenhower campaign was open about the plan to use television and "mass communication" to campaign instead of traditional cross-country travel. Eisenhower believed he could use television to win the 1956 election, and his effective use of it likely contributed to his victory.

While the Democratic Party also embraced television in this election, they continued other campaign practices because Stevenson struggled to convert his message to this new medium. In describing the Democrats' struggle with television during the 1956 campaign Allen

¹ Allen, Craig. "Our First 'Television' Candidate: Eisenhower over Stevenson in 1956." *Journalism Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 352.

² Allen, Craig "Our First 'Television' Candidate: Eisenhower over Stevenson in 1956", 354.

³ Allen, Craig M. "TV and the 1956 Presidential Campaign: Insights into the Evolution of Political Television," August 1, 1987, 6.

⁴ Kenworthy, E. W. "Campaign Special: TV or Train?: Will the Five-Minute Spot Doom the Whistle-Stop? That Remains to Be Seen. But Both Parties Are Concentrating on TV This Year. Campaign Special: TV or Train?" *New York Times*. 1956, sec. The New York Times Magazine, 1.

⁵ Ibid.

wrote, “Evidence suggests that the Democrats were caught in a shifting tide in American politics brought on by television, marked by a candidate who seemed to view TV, at best, as a necessary evil.”⁶ Democrats spent millions of dollars on TV campaigning, but Stevenson was not as willing as Eisenhower to sell himself and his campaign like a brand on TV. As Douglas Slaybaugh explains, “Stevenson’s failure stemmed from both his reluctance to be presented like a packaged commodity and his difficulty in creating a popular image other than what he so much seemed to be: a speaker.”⁷ These quotes about Stevenson’s struggle to campaign as a television candidate explain why the Stevenson campaign continued to do whistle-stop train trips. Stevenson’s best qualities were not easily displayed in television commercials because he was not as open and charismatic as Eisenhower. Stevenson traveled around the country, paying special attention to the states he almost won in 1952, but his struggles with television marred the campaign and prevented his victory.⁸ The Democratic Party was not as effective at using television in their campaign because Stevenson struggled to sell himself on television as effectively as Eisenhower, likely costing him the election.

Since there were more women than men of voting age, both parties wanted to get the majority of the female vote, but they went about it different ways. By 1956, people finally started to understand that it could not be assumed that a married woman would automatically vote like her husband. In her piece on how politicians were trying to entice female voters, Nona Brown wrote, “One basic, widely endorsed point is that women cannot be counted on simply to follow the political faith of their husbands.”⁹ Women were finally seen as separate voters from their

⁶ Allen, Craig, “Our First ‘Television’ Candidate: Eisenhower over Stevenson in 1956”, 355.

⁷ Slaybaugh, Douglas. “Adlai Stevenson, Television, and the Presidential Campaign of 1956.” *Illinois Historical Journal* 89, no. 1 (January 1996): 4.

⁸ Allen, Craig, “Our First ‘Television’ Candidate: Eisenhower over Stevenson in 1956”, 355-356.

⁹ Brown, Nona B. “Women’s Vote: The Bigger Half?: There Are, Potentially, More Women Voters than Men. So, Politicians Are Scheming to Get Them to Vote--and Vote Right. Women’s Vote: The Bigger Half?” *New York Times*. 1956, sec. The New York Times Magazine, 1.

husbands and with this idea of independent voting came the question of whether women needed to be campaigned to separately. The assistant chairman of the Republican National Committee and the vice chairman of the Democratic National Committee, both of whom were women, had very different views on the matter. Republican Bertha Adkins declared, “There is no question that the woman’s point of view is more subjective and personal. Women are more concerned about the honesty and integrity of the candidate, and they often react emotionally to his personality. If they don’t like him, they may very well stay home on election day.”¹⁰ She believed that women needed to be campaigned to differently with more of an emphasis on personality. In contrast, Democrat Katie Louchheim believed, “There just isn’t any such thing as a women’s vote, or any appeal that is more effective for women than for men. The appeal of a candidate’s personality is just as strong for men as for women, and women are interested in all issues.”¹¹ While not every member of their respective parties shared the same views on female voters as these two women, these contrasting views help to explain why Republicans made certain television ads directed at women and Democrats tried to campaign to everyone. These choices allowed Republicans to exploit the intense gender ideology of the 1950’s and cost Democrats the opportunity to reach a wider community. In 1956, the issue of enticing women voters was a question for both parties, but only Republicans decided to campaign specifically to women, which gave Eisenhower an advantage.

Five of the nine television ads that the Republican Party made for the 1956 presidential election only featured women, and these unique ads show a shift in the perception of women as voters. As explained before, women were now viewed as being independent from their husbands,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Brown, Nona “Women’s Vote: The Bigger Half?”, *New York Times* October 21, 1956, 2.

and the Eisenhower campaign believed they deserved special attention. One of his television ads featured ten women explaining why they were voting for Eisenhower. This advertisement opened with a woman explaining, “This year there are fifty-four million women eligible to vote – two and a half million more women than men, enough to decide the whole election.”¹² The opening quote of this important advertisement explains why Eisenhower campaigned directly to women. He believed that female voters could determine the results of the election, and he wanted women vote for him. In the 1952 election approximately 58% of female voters voted for Eisenhower, so he needed their votes to win again.¹³ In this advertisement he attempted to show that he should have been women’s candidate of choice. The woman in the ad finished her introduction by saying, “And because they believe he represents their best hope of achieving these things, the women of America are making their choice for president Dwight D. Eisenhower.”¹⁴ This advertisement declared that the “women of America” were voting for Eisenhower to try to convince any wary women that she too should vote for him. This ad then circles back to the idea that women won him the election in 1952 and could help him win again by saying, “The women of our country swept Dwight D. Eisenhower into office four years ago. They will probably decide the election this time, and they like Ike.”¹⁵ In this advertisement devoted purely to women, Eisenhower demonstrated that how crucial women were to his reelection and that he believed women deserved special attention in his campaign. In this one

¹² Women Voters - “The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1956 Eisenhower vs Stevenson.” The Living Room Candidate, 2016. <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1956>.

¹³ Frutig, Jennifer Weeks. “The Gender Gap in Presidential Elections: Why Are White Males Voting More Republican and Why Are Women Casting More Democratic Ballots than Men?” Ph.D., University of Southern California, 1986. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1654780443/citation/6255153FA0D34A08PQ/1>. 118.

¹⁴ Women Voters - “The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1956 Eisenhower vs Stevenson.” The Living Room Candidate, 2016.

¹⁵ Ibid.

advertisement, Eisenhower firmly established the importance of female voters for his campaign and showed women that they mattered as voters.

One of Eisenhower's chief advantages over Stevenson, that Eisenhower was married and Stevenson divorced, made Eisenhower especially appealing to women at the time. As described in a 1956 newspaper article on female voters, "If they like his wife, see in her a charming, attractive image of the perfect helpmeet, the political personality of the man gains an intangible dimension."¹⁶ The newspaper then described the problem this idea caused for Democrats saying, "The Democrats this year are definitely handicapped in this competition. Adlai Stevenson is not only unmarried – he has been divorced."¹⁷ That Stevenson did not have a stable family life caused problems for him in 1950's America. May wrote that at the time "the key to successful families, the authors concluded, was moral homes in which men and women adhered to traditional gender roles."¹⁸ At a time when stable families and strict gender roles were crucial, many Americans were suspicious of a divorced president. In contrast, Eisenhower's commercials described him by saying, "He believes in the basic traditions of American life: home and family and faith in God" while showing video of Eisenhower with his wife and grandchildren.¹⁹ Even in his ads targeting the general population, which essentially meant men, Eisenhower used his family as a demonstration of his superior character. The commercial directed at women ended with the quote, "And here's somebody else they like, too – Ike's beloved Mamie, whose smile and modesty and easy, natural charm make her the ideal First Lady. Let's keep our First Lady in the White House for four more years."²⁰ Mamie was just as popular as Eisenhower, especially

¹⁶ Nona Brown, "Women's Vote: The Bigger Half?", *New York Times* October 21, 1956, 3.

¹⁷ Nona Brown, "Women's Vote: The Bigger Half?", *New York Times* October 21, 1956, 4.

¹⁸ Elaine Tyler May, "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb, Chicago Press (1989), 163.

¹⁹ Cartoon Guy (Eisenhower, 1956), Museum of the Moving Image (2016).

²⁰ Women Voters - "The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1956 Eisenhower vs Stevenson." The Living Room Candidate, 2016..

with women, and since the alternative was no First Lady, she was a very powerful campaign tool. Eisenhower never blatantly discussed Stevenson's divorce, but he campaigned with Mamie to highlight the distinction. Eisenhower portrayed himself as the idealized family man while Stevenson faced criticism for not being able to maintain his marriage.

Eisenhower's campaign also used Mamie to demonstrate to female voters that Eisenhower was always willing to listen to women. While the narrator declared, "Let's keep our First Lady in the White House for four more years. November 6th vote for Dwight D.



Figure 1. Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower

Eisenhower,"²¹ a video of Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower walking through the garden was shown. As Figure 1, which is a still from that clip, highlights, Eisenhower listened closely to what Mamie had to say and showed that he cared about her. At the end of a commercial where the women of America explained their views on Eisenhower and their hopes for the future, Eisenhower subtly showed that not only did he have a stable family life and a wife

who was "the ideal First Lady", but he listened to and respected his wife's opinions. He also demonstrated this willingness to listen when in October of 1956 Eisenhower answered questions on a variety of topics in front of a panel of women. This event was broadcast nationwide during "soap-opera time" so millions of women could it.²² He used events like these to show that the opinions of female voters mattered just as much to him as the opinions of male voters.

²¹ Women Voters - "The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1956 Eisenhower vs Stevenson." The Living Room Candidate, 2016..

²² Hartmann, Robert T. "Eisenhower Gives Prosperity Recipe: Continuance Assured With GOP Victory, He Tells Women's Quiz EISENHOWER QUIZ." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*; *Los Angeles, Calif.* October 25, 1956.

Eisenhower's visible respect for his wife along with this televised women's panel showed female voters that Eisenhower cared about their views.

In the 1950's women were often portrayed on television as white housewives, working in the background while the family relaxed, but Eisenhower's commercials portrayed educated women in different roles and stages of life. In his more typical commercials, Eisenhower depicted men in various roles, showing a farmer, taxi driver, and union member, but in this election he also applied a similar philosophy to appeal to a greater variety of women.²³ One



Figure 2. Lena Washington

commercial depicted a college girl who discussed how she did not trust Stevenson to deal with foreign countries and another showed African American Lena Washington at her desk as she explained, "I'm voting for Ike because I think he can give us lasting peace. He stopped Communist aggression in Indochina, Iran, and

right here in America."^{24, 25} Figure 2, a still from the Lena Washington advertisement, shows how this commercial portrayed a well-dressed, educated African American woman. Not only were these women not prototypical white American housewives, but they also had educated opinions about the election and had real reasons for voting Republican. There was one commercial only featuring a housewife and there were many depictions of mothers, but he importantly captured women working and in school in addition to the home.²⁶ He did not just

²³ "The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1956 Eisenhower vs Stevenson." The Living Room Candidate, 2016.

²⁴ College Girl – "The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1956 Eisenhower vs Stevenson." The Living Room Candidate, 2016.

²⁵ Lena Washington "The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1956 Eisenhower vs Stevenson." The Living Room Candidate, 2016.

²⁶ "The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1956 Eisenhower vs Stevenson." The Living Room Candidate, 2016.

limit his campaign to the stereotype, but reached out to the wider voting audience by showing real women in the diverse roles they could take, just as men were often shown.

Eisenhower's other advertisements and Stevenson's ads demonstrate how male dominated normal political advertisements. The few women depicted in Eisenhower's normal or 'default' commercials were a secretary and two mothers talking about their sons, and they were greatly outnumbered by male Americans.²⁷ The advertisement addressing female voters had a female narrator, but every other voiceover in Eisenhower's commercials was a man because a male narrator was the default. Eisenhower's ads featured a football game, a war scene, and many more men than women because most political campaigning focused on men.²⁸ The gendered nature of his normal ads almost required Eisenhower created separate ads if he wanted to appeal to female voters. The Democratic party, so set on campaigning to everyone and avoiding gendered campaigning only depicted one woman very briefly in the nine political advertisements made for Adlai Stevenson. That one woman was Stevenson's daughter-in-law who walked in the gate in front of him.²⁹ Stevenson commercials rarely featured normal Americans at all since most of his advertisements featured either him or vice presidential candidate Estes Kefauver speaking to the camera for the majority of the ad. The Stevenson campaign did not seem to pick up on the nuances of television campaigning and the difference between speaking in a five minute advertisement and at a live speech. The Democratic ads meant to appeal to men and women were heavy on politics and showed no meaningful female representation. Eisenhower's male

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ The Man from Libertyville: High Cost of Living - "The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1956 Eisenhower vs Stevenson." The Living Room Candidate, 2016.

dominated normal commercials and the lack of women in Stevenson's advertisements demonstrate why Eisenhower's other advertisements were important.

The 1956 election was significant because it was the first time that a candidate turned almost completely to television campaigning and women were finally respected as an important part of the voting population. The Republican and Democratic parties had remarkably different approaches to the issue of television, mostly because of the candidates themselves, and female voters. Both parties finally recognized the power of female voters, but only Republicans decided to create specific ads targeted at women. Not only were women finally depicted in political advertisements, but they were depicted as more than the stereotypical middle class, white housewife. It is impossible to say for sure that the results of the election were a direct result of the difference in their advertising strategies, especially since the results had been similarly skewed in 1952, but 61 percent of women voted Republican compared to 55 percent of men.³⁰ That high a percentage of women has never voted for the Republican party since. In the end this 1956 campaign was critical for American political campaigning because it proved that a candidate could win by investing heavily in television and marketing instead of traveling extensively. It also proved that candidates should pay attention to female voters and how they are portrayed in advertisements. The success of the Republicans campaign and the failure of the Democratic campaign set the precedent that gendered advertising and targeting women and men separately was an effective campaign strategy. Eisenhower's 1956 presidential campaign matters because it showed the importance of television in campaigning and the value of respecting female voters.

³⁰ Frutig, Jennifer Weeks. "The Gender Gap in Presidential Elections: Why Are White Males Voting More Republican and Why Are Women Casting More Democratic Ballots than Men?", 118.

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