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The Role of Information in Getting Unmarried Women Out to Vote Results of Focus Groups and Web Survey

To: Women's Voices. Women Vote.

From: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

Executive Summary

In 2004, motivated by a close, high stakes Presidential election, unmarried women turned out in record numbers. Even so, unmarried women were underrepresented in the 2004 electorate. The challenge for 2006 remains how to continue to involve unmarried women in the electoral process and how to expand their presence in the electorate. We find that with efforts to educate unmarried women about the candidates and the issues, these women have the potential to make a substantial impact on the outcome of a midterm election traditionally characterized by low voter turnout.

As we found in our national survey of unmarried Americans, unmarried women hunger for information about candidates and elections, and they commonly cite lack of information as the major reason why they do not vote.¹ The goal of this current research is to better understand what kind of information will help motivate unmarried women to turn out at the polls. Given that unmarried women are less engaged than married women in politics and have obstacles to acquiring political information, we seek to understand what kind of information they want, the manner in which they want it presented, and the message framework that works best for presenting it.

We find that providing unmarried women with information about the elections and the issues that affect them most removes a key barrier to voting. While women often rely on friends and family or local television news for political information, they will trust a non-partisan organization if the information is unbiased and factual. Moreover, they trust that information more than traditional candidate or party communications. The information should be verifiable, even if by simply including a website with the source of information. It may help, moreover, to provide unmarried women with information about the process of casting their ballot such as the date of the election and the site of their polling place. Finally, women on their own respond to messages that tap their sense of civic responsibility, using images and language that they can connect to emotionally.

¹ Women's Voices. Women Vote. January 4-19, 2006.

Key Findings

- Unmarried women often do not vote because they see elections as irrelevant to them or do not have the time or opportunity to learn about the candidates and issues.
- Family and friends, local television news and the Internet are key information sources about politics and elections for unmarried women.
- Non-partisan organizations are important sources of trusted political information if the information they offer is objective and unbiased.
- Non-partisan organizations offer more trustworthy information than candidates.
- Issue information about elections and candidates must be balanced. Unmarried women want to see side-by-side comparisons of candidate positions presented fairly and accurately.
- Citations (such as websites) for statements made about the candidates make the information verifiable and thus more believable.
- Women value information both about the issues in elections and, to a lesser degree, about casting their ballot.
- If unmarried women connect emotionally to images and language in direct mail, they are more likely to read it and find it motivating.
- In this research, unmarried women respond to information about voting that is framed by a message that evokes civic responsibility to cast their vote and the notion that their vote can make a difference.

Research Design

This memo is based on two sources of data: four focus groups in Phoenix, Arizona and Cleveland, Ohio and a national web survey of unmarried women. The first Arizona group consisted of Hispanic unmarried women, and the second consisted of white unmarried women, 45 years and older. The first Ohio group consisted of white unmarried women, ages 18-29 and the second group consisted of white unmarried women, ages 30-44. All groups were registered voters, had voted in 2004, but half were likely 2006 voters and half were unlikely 2006 voters. Focus groups are qualitative; though indicative of social attitudes, they are not drawn from a representative sample and thus cannot be generalized to the population at large.

The web survey is based on responses from 1000 unmarried women registered voters conducted with a web panel.² It employed a complicated experimental design, where we tested five separate mail pieces in four separate states (Arizona, Missouri, Ohio and Washington). Each respondent received mail pieces customized to the Senate races in their state. We showed each mail piece to approximately 600 respondents and asked a series of closed ended and open ended questions about their reactions to these pieces. We were also able to ask pre- and post-questions about motivation to vote and gauge the impact of the separate mail pieces on increasing women's likelihood to vote. Finally, we re-tested the message frameworks derived from the national survey research and the focus groups.

² The websurvey used a non-probability opt-in sample, it is national in origin, but we drew our sample to represent only residents in Arizona, Missouri, Ohio, and Washington. States quotas were implemented to ensure even distribution across the four states.

The Problem with Traditional Political Communication and How Non-Partisan Organizations Can Help

It is not surprising that unmarried women say that they rely most heavily on friends and family for political information, and they trust friends and family to give them information without “spin.” As we have noted in previous research, these women are less news aware than married women and they tend to work in jobs that lack politically relevant social networks.³ Friends and families – even just causal conversation – are often their only source of information about politics. Moreover, unmarried women are so cynical about politics and political candidates, in particular, they are loath to believe or rely on any political advertisements they happen to see on television. They tend to dismiss this information as biased or confusing. These feelings are only confirmed when they see that politicians do not follow through with their promises or leave them out of the conversation.

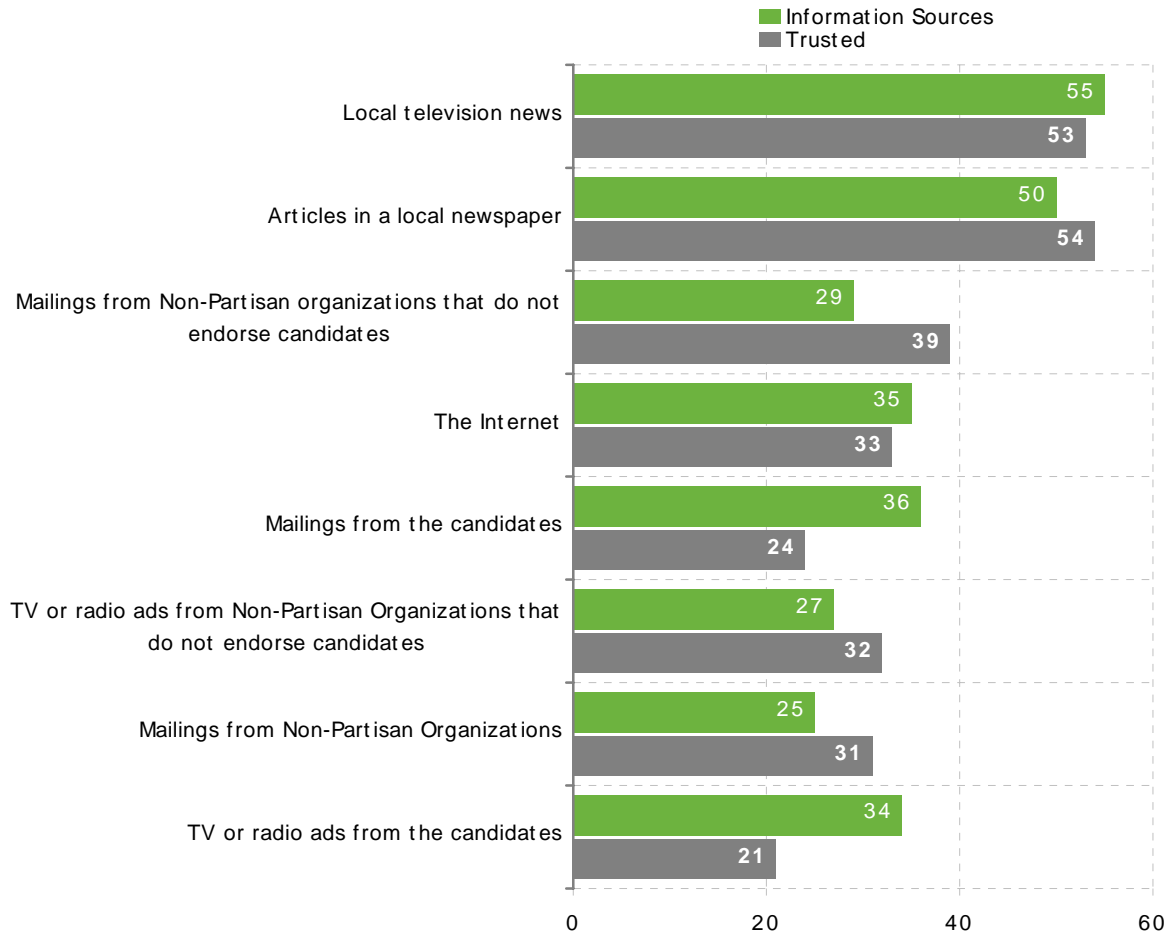
When the women we spoke to do actively seek out information, many of them rely on local television news, local newspapers and the Internet⁴ – particularly if they are younger or have a job where they are online. With the Internet, the notion is that they can collect information from many sources, weigh the competing views and come to their own decision about a particular issue or political choice. While it is not clear if this research process actually occurs, it is important to note that the primary issue is that these women want information they can trust.

In the web survey, we see that there is a disconnection between the sources of information available to women and they kinds of information they would trust. While they depend on local television and local newspapers and they trust those sources of information, they are less confident about the information they receive from candidates (a leading source of information after news and the Internet). Similarly, they find communication from non-partisan organizations more trustworthy than what they receive and hear from candidates. Moreover, respondents are more likely to trust mailings from non-partisan organizations that do not endorse candidates than information from the Internet, candidate mailings or advertisements on television and the radio.

³ “The State of Unmarried America”, Women’s Voices, Women Vote, January 2006.

⁴ Although newspapers and the Internet are frequently listed as important sources of political information, given newspaper subscription rates and the difficulty of compiling and summarizing the enormous amount of information available on the Internet, respondents may be overreporting their usage.

■ **Figure 1:** Trusted and Most Used Sources



There is a clear role for “non-partisan” organizations in informing unmarried women about elections and candidates. We did learn, however, that there are some clear parameters for this information. These women want clear, concise information and a reason to believe that their issues could be important in November. They respond to brief, easily digestible information about where the candidates stand on the issues, and above all, in order to be credible to these women, political information must be objective, balanced, and verifiable.

- Objectivity.** Unmarried women do not want to be delivered information that they think is “spin.” Rather, they would like to be given information about the issues that they care about so they can make decisions about whether or not the candidates reflect their values. All focus group participants examined mail pieces with information about the candidates’ positions on a few key issues; the mail pieces featured a disclaimer stating that WVWV—a non-partisan organization that does not endorse candidates—was the source of the mailer. Across these groups, the disclaimer stating WVWV’s non-partisan

status proved critical to winning their trust. Nearly all participants commented about the legitimacy that such a disclaimer lent the entire mail piece. The fact that WVWV does not endorse candidates also provided evidence of objectivity for a number of these women.

- **Balance.** Presenting information about the candidates in a way that is balanced is also critical to credibility. Unmarried women look for fairness in their political information. Presenting information side-by-side permitted the women in the focus groups to compare the candidates and issues against each other and evaluate for themselves which candidate they prefer. When presenting the candidates' issue positions, we found it is even important to use the words "favor" and "oppose" in equal numbers when describing the issue positions of the candidates, so as not to suggest bias toward one candidate or another.
- **Verifiability.** The women in our focus groups wanted to be able to verify the accuracy of informational statements for instance by citing votes taken by a current elected official or a website where they can find more information. Votes and statements of candidates positions can be verified by checking on votes on government websites or candidate websites. Moreover, websites provide readers the opportunity to learn more about each candidate or issue and then draw their own conclusions. They may not choose to visit the website, but they want to at least have the ability to verify the accuracy of the information for themselves if they desire.
- **Simplicity.** The unmarried women in our focus groups wanted clear, concise information. Mail pieces with easily digestible side-by-side comparison of candidates' positions on the issues were quite effective with these women; they are useful for women who lack the time to learn about the candidates and issues or simply would not seek it out on their own.

In the mailers we tested, participants read a brief statement about a candidate's position on a particular issue, which was followed by a website where the reader could go to verify the information. Citations like this dramatically improved the credibility of the mailer. By including links to websites, participants felt the information was more likely to be accurate, and they had the opportunity to learn more about an issue or candidate on their own.

The Content, Look and Feel of Persuasive Communication

In the web survey, we tested five pieces of direct mail pieces (see appendix for mail pieces). We originally tested versions of these pieces in the focus groups, but they were revised based on our learning. Four of the five pieces displayed candidates' stands on issues – side by side – in a factual manner with appropriate sourcing. In every case, these pieces were customized by state (e.g., the Arizona respondents saw a piece comparing Senator John Kyl and challenger Jim Pederson). One piece focused on process of voting included how to learn about the candidates, how to register to vote, and how to find your polling place.

In the focus groups, we found that women liked the idea of learning from mail pieces. They found the mail pieces a very compelling way to learn about where the candidates stood on issues, and to a lesser degree with biographical information. They appreciated content relevant to their lives – addressing issues such as healthcare or education.

- Issue Content.** Unmarried women want to know where the candidates stand on the issues. But unmarried women are not interested in just any issue, they are interested in the concerns that matter to them most. Keep in mind that one of the reasons unmarried women do not participate in politics is they believe that politicians do not talk about the issues they care about most such as healthcare and retirement. As we learned in our survey work, unmarried women are consumed with their economic insecurity including healthcare, retirement, jobs and gas prices. A number of participants said that they would vote in November only if they felt strongly about one of the candidates or their approach to issues. If it seems that candidates and parties are not addressing their issues, what is the point of voting? Please note that these issues were not framed as “women’s issues,” per se, even if the visuals of the mail pieces invoked images of women who looked like them.
- Candidate Background.** The truth is, voters care about candidates’ backgrounds. They want to know where they come from, what kind of experience and values they would bring to public office. Unmarried women are no different. Women like personal information about the candidate because it gives them a sense of the values and background of the candidate. The women in the groups say this information helps them make inferences about the beliefs of the candidate. These women also want a sense of the occupational background and political experience of the candidate because these are relevant considerations in their vote choice.
- Political Process.** These women liked to learn about the political process; they might be reluctant to say they do not know how to vote, but the younger women in our groups found information about registering to vote and the process of casting their ballot very useful. This information also helped convince them that voting really is less time-consuming and complicated than they previously thought. Despite having more political experience than the younger women, our older women also noted that including information on dates and location makes the voting process easier by putting all the information in one convenient place.

The covers also varied in their imagery. We learned in the focus groups that unmarried women are drawn to images that evoke an emotional reaction. Our respondents were drawn to mail pieces that featured pictures of women on the front covers of the mail pieces, rather than pictures of two (white male) candidates. These women also preferred pictures of women that “looked like them,” in terms of race and age. They prefer photos of a woman or women that aren’t idealized images of women, but regular women who remind them of themselves and their friends. These women also were attracted to covers with patriotic images, which tapped into their sense that voting is a civic duty and a key part of caring about America.

The Test

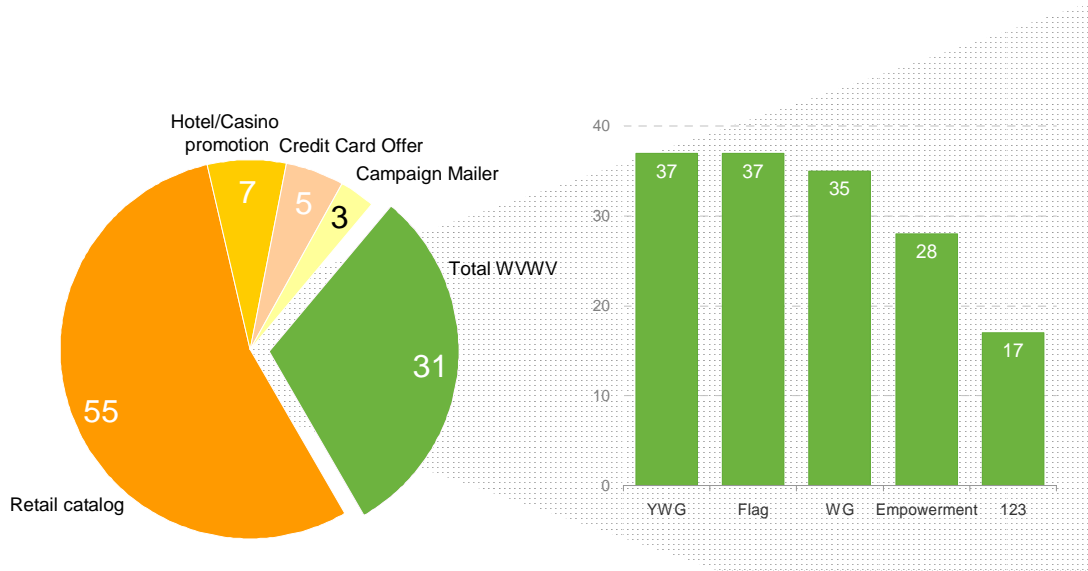
The revised mail pieces for the web survey took these findings and adjusted them accordingly.

Web Survey Mail Pieces

- 123/process (describes the process of voting, including registering to vote and finding your polling place)
- Young women's guide (features photo of diverse group of women with "Women's Guide to the Election" caption; back features information about where the candidates stand on six major issues)
- Women's guide (features photo of a woman with "Women's Guide to the Election" caption; back features information about where the candidates stand on six major issues)
- Flag (features a picture of a flag and caption about Americans having a voice; back features information about where the candidates stand on six major issues)
- Empowerment (features a photo of a woman with caption about women having the power to enact change; back features information about where the candidates stand on six major issues)

In the web survey, we found that overall, the most powerful pieces include images of women, explicitly frame the mail piece as a "women's" guide and use patriotic imagery (all three of these pieces compared the candidate's positions). We employed a "mail box" exercise at the start of the survey where each respondent was shown five pieces of mail – a catalog from a popular retailer, a credit card offer, a promotion from a casino/hotel, a candidate mailer and one piece of WVWV mail. We found that significant numbers chose WVWV mailer instead of one of the other choices. In fact, 37 percent selected the young women's guide when it was shown to respondents, 37 percent selected the flag piece (37 percent) and 35 percent selected the women's guide. On average, the WVWV mailer was chosen ten times more frequently than the candidate mailer (31 percent versus 3 percent).

■ **Figure 2:** Mailbox Exercise – By Mailer and Broken Out by WVWV Mailer



These pieces – particularly the young women’s guide and the flag piece - were on the whole the most “helpful,” “believable” and caught the “attention” of our respondents. The “process” (or “123”) piece did seem believable to unmarried women, which is not surprising given that the piece literally contained “facts,” but we found it was not among the most compelling overall. In fact, when forced to choose, these unmarried women strongly prefer information on the issue position of candidates (81 percent) to information about the voting process (19 percent).

Figure 3: Ratings of “10” for Helpful (Percent responding by mailer)

“How helpful was this information to you, on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 is extremely helpful and 0 is not at all helpful?”

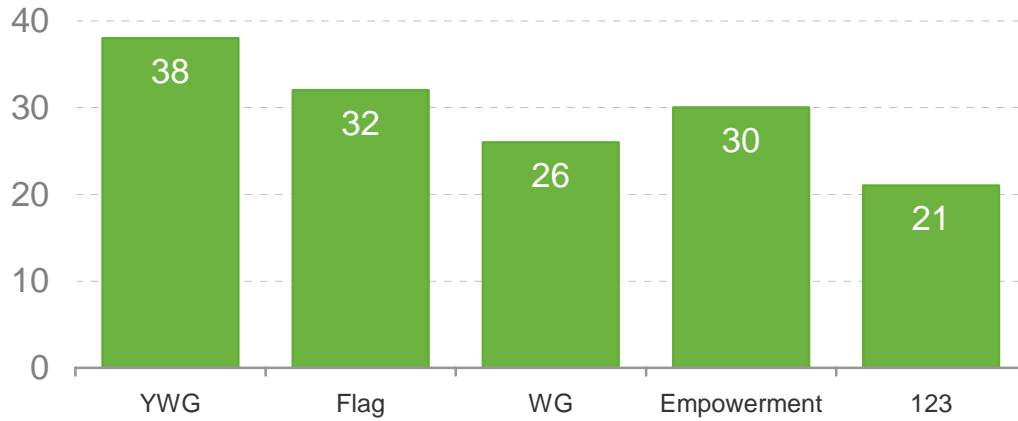
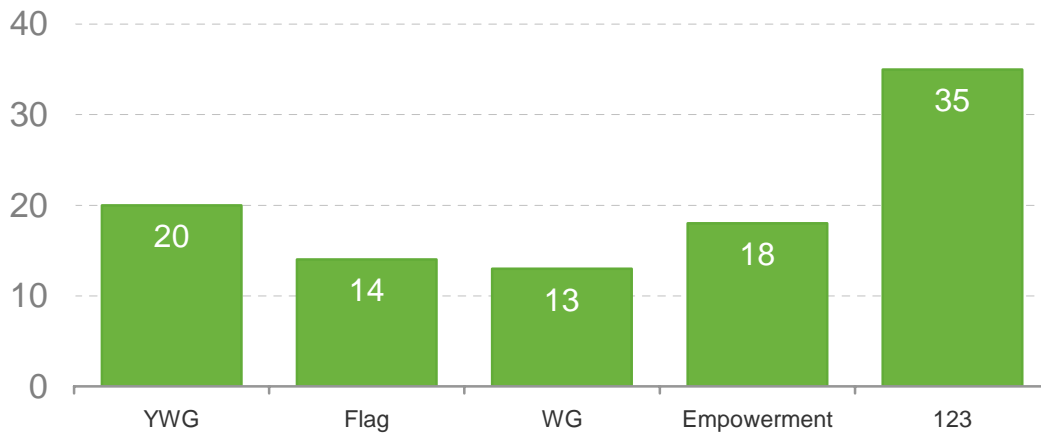


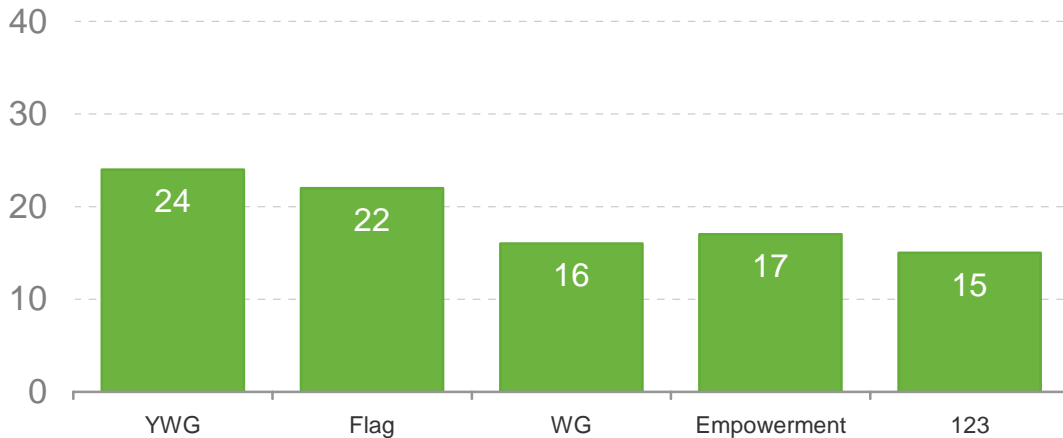
Figure 4: Ratings of “10” for Believable (Percent responding by mailer)

“Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: “The information on the mailing was believable.”



■ **Figure 5:** Ratings of “10” for Caught Attention (Percent responding by mailer)

“Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: “The mailing caught my attention and made me want to learn more.”



There are number of reasons why the young women’s guide and generic women’s guide stood out. Because we used the word “guide” on the cover of the mail piece, respondents were primed to pay attention to the issue comparisons between the candidates. Overall, about half of all responses the women’s guide (51 percent) and the young women’s guide (50 percent) noted issue information; in contrast, only 35 percent of responses in the flag piece and 36 percent with the empowerment piece noted the presence of issue information.⁵

Moreover, the use of the word “woman” suggested that there was something particular to women in the guide, even though we presented identical information in the flag and empowerment pieces. Thirty-two percent of responses in the young women’s guide and 23 percent in the women’s guide mentioned “women” with, compared to only 20 percent in the empowerment piece.

When it comes to imagery, the flag pieces and the young women’s guide clearly stood out – 50 percent of responses in the flag piece noted the flag imagery or the cover versus 6 percent with the young women’s guide (18 percent of responses in the women’s guide talked about the imagery).

⁵ Because multiple responses were permitted, numbers will not sum to 100 percent.

■ **Figure 6:** Open-Ended Responses: What Stood Out? (Percent of responses by mailer)

Open Ended Responses

What part of this mailing stood out to you?

	YWG	Flag	WG	Empowerment	123
Issues	50	35	51	36	18
Women	32	0	23	20	14
Images	6	50	18	27	45

*Multiple responses permitted – will not sum to 100%

In contrast, the empowerment piece and the process piece did not seem to tap into the same emotional or informational content as the other pieces. Despite the fact that the empowerment piece highlighted women’s empowerment, only 20 percent of responses mentioned this aspect as standing out to them. Moreover, despite the fact that the empowerment piece contains the same issue information as the other pieces, only 36 percent of responses mentioned the information about the issues.

In the open ended exercise, respondents clearly had a hard time finding something distinctive or compelling about the process piece. Even though the process piece was completely focused on information, only about 18 percent of responses mentioned issue information as the most prominent aspect of the piece. Only 14 percent mentioned women as an aspect of the piece that stood out., even though a woman was on the cover.

Persuading Unmarried Women to Vote

Collectively the WVWV mail pieces moved unmarried women in this experiment towards being more likely to vote. Overall, 13 percent shifted towards more likely to vote while 5

percent moved towards less likely to vote. Keep in mind that generally people over report their likelihood to vote, so there is relatively little room to move unmarried women in the survey context. The shift towards interest in voting that we did see, importantly, primarily came from the unmarried women who express the least amount of interest in the election – unmarried women who rated themselves 0-5 on level of interest in the election were much more likely to shift than those with more interest in the elections (26 percent versus 9 percent shifted).

■ **Figure 7:** Voter Turnout Shift: By Interest in Election (Percent responding)

Shift Summary, by Interest to Vote

Shift Summary

As you know, there will be elections in November for the U.S. Congress and other offices. On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 meaning NOT AT ALL INTERESTED and 10 meaning VERY INTERESTED please tell me how interested you are in this year's elections?

	Total	Interest 6-10	Interest 0-5
Shift toward	13	9	26
Shift away	5	5	7
Net	+8	+4	+19

“What are the chances that you will vote in the election for Congress this November, on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 means you absolutely certain to vote and 0 means you are certain not to vote?”

The experimental results confirm what we learned in the focus groups and the national survey research. Unmarried women are most persuaded by messages that invoke women’s civic responsibility to participate in electoral politics and tap into their potential political power. These unmarried women connect to the notion that voting is patriotic – it is a right fought for by their ancestors and a privilege of citizenship. As we mentioned above, patriotic imagery like the flag evokes a strong reaction with these women.

We also find that messages that empower women to enact change are very persuasive for these women. “You can’t change America if you don’t vote,” for instance, is a powerful message, as is “Make a choice. Make a difference. Vote.” Both of these messages resonate with women on their own because they make politics seem less far-removed from their lives, and show them that through the simple act of voting they can have an impact on politics and policy.

■ **Figure 8:** Convincing Slogans (Percent responding)

Slogans

Here are a series of statements that might motivate people to vote this year. Please select whether you find each statement to be a very convincing, somewhat convincing, a little convincing or not at all convincing reason to vote this year.

	Very/Somewhat Convincing	Total Positive Shift
Make a choice. Make a difference. Vote	80	78
You can't change America if you don't vote	80	84
Your voice matters. Make a difference. Vote	79	81
It's your responsibility. Vote	74	62
Your voice matters. Your vote makes them listen. Vote	73	78
An America that works for us is up to you. Vote	72	69
You wouldn't let men pick your shoes...why would you let them pick your leaders? Vote	52	50

Conclusion

For unmarried women, information can remove a key barrier to voting and help increase turnout in 2006. These women trust, and greatly desire political information, provided the message appears unbiased, balanced, and verifiable. As we have found in previous research, unmarried women want to look for candidates that will reflect the issues and the agenda they care about. However, they are also cynical about politics. Consequently, the best information tools we can give them are ones that do not have spin.

Non-partisan organizations have an important opportunity to reach out to these women and get them information about the issues and the process of voting. This information can cut through the noise of junk mail and campaign advertising, and motivate women to vote, if the information is presented with imagery evokes an emotional connection and a message that taps their civic responsibility as Americans and alludes to their potential political power as women. In particular, Women's Voices. Women's Vote., a non-partisan organization, is poised to become one of these effective third party sources because it has already been using a non-partisan approach to reach out to unmarried women.